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US Intel Assessment Finds Racially Motivated Extremists to Be Most Lethal Domestic Terrorism Threat
by [Mary F.](#)

A US intelligence assessment released Wednesday has found racially motivated extremists to be the most lethal domestic terrorism threat in the US. According to the report, many extremists become radicalized after consuming violent extremist material online.

"The IC [intelligence community] assesses that racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and militia violent extremists (MVEs) present the most lethal DVE [Domestic Violent Extremist] threats, with RMVEs most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians and MVEs typically targeting law enforcement and government personnel and facilities," reads the [intelligence assessment report](#).

The report also states that radicalization and mobilization to violence are expected this year due to "new sociopolitical developments," such as the "narratives of fraud in the recent general election, the emboldening impact of the violent breach of the US Capitol, conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conspiracy theories promoting violence."

Intelligence officials are determined that DVEs use popular social media platforms, websites for targeted audiences and encrypted chat applications to recruit new extremists and to

"disseminate materials that contribute to radicalization."

The latest assessment comes after US President Joe Biden last month directed intelligence officials in his administration to evaluate the threat of domestic violent extremism in the US in the wake of the January 6 Capitol riots.

"The Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol and the tragic deaths and destruction that occurred underscored what we all know: The rise of domestic violent extremism is a serious and growing national security threat," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at the time, also noting that the administration plans to develop policies to address the threat, [AP reported at the time](#). Rep. Adam Schiff, the Democratic chair of the House Intelligence Committee, also said it was "critical" that the Biden administration quickly address the threat of domestic extremism.

"In particular, far-right, white supremacist extremism, nurtured on online platforms, has become one of the most dangerous threats to our nation," Schiff said.

Earlier this month, the FBI also warned that racially motivated extremists and anti-government extremists are likely to be this year's biggest domestic threat.

"Looking forward, we assess the domestic violent extremist threat will continue to pose an elevated threat of violence to the U.S.," Jill Sanborn, the FBI's assistant director of the counterterrorism division, [told lawmakers](#) during congressional testimony.

"We expect racially or ethnically motivated and violent extremists and anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists will very likely pose the greatest domestic terrorism threats throughout 2021, and in fact leading into 2022," she added.

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US Nurse Charged With Stealing Two Syringes of COVID-19 Vaccine - Reports
by [Mary F.](#)

There currently three COVID-19 vaccines that have received emergency use authorization by the US Food and Drug Administration: Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. Around 2 million vaccine doses are being administered in the US on a daily basis.

Saeedeh Elahi, a 41-year-old nurse, has been charged with trying to steal COVID-19 vaccines from the TCF Center in Detroit, Michigan. The TCF Center is a convention center located in downtown Detroit that is being used as a drive-thru vaccination clinic.

According to local police officials, the woman is accused of placing two syringes of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine and two vaccination cards in her pocket while she was administering vaccines at the TCF Center on March 15, the Detroit Free Press [reported](#).

Police reported to the scene after another nurse who saw Elahi put the vaccines in her pocket reported the incident to authorities.

Elahi has since been charged with one count of larceny in a building and is expected to be arraigned at the 36th District Court in downtown Detroit on Wednesday.

"There is simply no excuse for this alleged conduct," Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worth said in a statement [obtained](#) by Click On Detroit.

"This past year has been extremely stressful for everyone. There is some light at the end of the tunnel because of the various vaccines. State and local governments have been doing their level best to get vaccines to as many people as possible. This case should send a loud and clear message that this conduct is criminal and will be taken seriously," Worth added.

Police officers also retrieved the vaccinations from Elahi.

Hakim Berry, the city's chief operating officer, also told the Free Press on Tuesday that this is the first such incident at the site, which administers several thousand vaccinations daily.

"It was totally odd," he told the outlet. "It really didn't make any sense with the amount of vaccine coming into the area. I don't understand her motive."

At least 109,000 people have been vaccinated at the convention center since January 13.

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Canada Calls Iran's Report on Downed Ukrainian Jet 'Incomplete', Vows to Release Own Results

by [Mary F.](#)

Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 on January 8, 2020 was shot down by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) after taking off from the Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport. The passenger plane was bound for Kiev.

The Canadian government has expressed disappointment in Iran's findings into the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet.

In the report published this week, Iran attributed the shooting-down of the plane, which resulted in the deaths of all 176 people on board, to an air defense operator's error. The final report was released by Iran's civil aviation body.

"The plane was identified as a hostile target due to a mistake by the air defence operator ... near Tehran and two missiles were fired at it," according to both the agency's website and the report, the latter of which was obtained by Reuters.

"The flight's operation did not have a role in creating the error by the air defence battery," the report added.

However, Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau in a statement Wednesday said that the report does not answer "critical questions."

"The report makes no attempt to answer critical questions about what truly happened. It appears incomplete and has no hard facts or evidence," he added. "The Government of Canada will soon disclose the results of its own investigations."

"There will be no solace for the families because the whole story, the complete story with the hard evidence to back it up is not being provided," Ralph Goodale, Canada's Minister of Public Safety, also added in a statement to Reuters.

Many of the victims of the crash were Canadian citizens or permanent residents. The victims also included people from Iran, Sweden, Afghanistan, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba slammed the results of Iran's investigation in the January 8 crash, calling it a "cynical attempt" by the country to conceal the real reasons behind the crash.

"What we saw in the published report today is nothing more than a cynical attempt to hide the true reasons for the downing of our plane," he said. "We will not allow Iran to hide the truth, we will not allow it to avoid responsibility for this crime."

Boeing 737-800 aircraft was shot down by Iranian surface-to-air missiles and crashed near Tehran shortly after departing from Iran's Imam Khomeini Airport.

The Iranian military has admitted that it unintentionally shot down the jetliner after confusing it with a hostile US cruise missile. The incident took place hours after Iranian missiles struck two Iraqi bases that host American troops in response to the January 3, 2020 [US-orchestrated assassination](#) of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani.

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Berlin Sees Start of Uranium Enrichment on New Centrifuges in Iran's Natanz as Violation of by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed that Iran has started enriching uranium at its underground Natanz plant with IR-4 centrifuges. Under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it was believed the only centrifuges at the facility were the older, less advanced IR-1 centrifuges.

Addressing the recent IAEA report, a representative of the German Foreign Ministry indicated on Wednesday that German officials are growing concerned over Iran's use of new centrifuges. An unidentified source with the department told Sputnik that the German government is viewing Iran's continued expansion as "very alarming." The official added that any violations of the nuclear agreement by Iran are "counterproductive" to ongoing efforts by JCPOA signatories to preserve the 2015 deal.

The foreign ministry source's remarks followed those made earlier by Sergey Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister. Ryabkov [previously informed](#) Sputnik that Moscow was growing concerned by Iran's actions, noting that Russian officials "have been calling and we keep calling on all sides to exercise restraint."

The Russian diplomat also urged the US to take up efforts to ease the current situation so that Iran may fall back to the terms established by the 2015 nuclear deal.

"[Washington] should eventually make progress in lifting sanctions. A certain impetus is needed," Ryabkov said. "But so far we only see expansion of the sanctions list targeting Iran. Therefore, Iran pursues the policy of gradually reducing compliance with its voluntary obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran keeps scaling up its nuclear activities."

The 2015 nuclear deal was established with the intent that it would prevent Iran from being able to build a nuclear weapon, which the country has repeatedly stated it has no intentions of doing. In exchange for lifting harsh sanctions imposed against the Middle Eastern country, Iran was expected to abide by several terms, including that it would only enrich uranium with its first-generation IR-1 centrifuges.

The [recent findings](#) by the IAEA determined that the more advanced IR-4 centrifuges had been installed at the Fuel Enrichment Plant in Natanz, and that Tehran will be installing a second cascade of said centrifuges at the facility in the near future. The IAEA's confirmation came weeks after Iran announced in February that it had installed the new centrifuges, but failed to offer more specifics on the matter.

The latest developments came after Iran announced last month that it would begin restricting IAEA inspections at its nuclear facilities should stiff US sanctions remain in place. However, a last-minute deal between Iran and IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi allowed for some inspections to remain in place.

Since the US' withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran has continued to pull away from its previously established commitments, and has instead opted to put pressure on remaining signatories to provide economic incentives that will combat Washington's financial hurdles. Under the Biden administration, the US and Iran have remained at a stalemate, as both countries have called on the other to [act first](#) on the matter.

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Mars' Long Lost Water Likely Hidden Beneath Red Planet's Crust, Study Finds
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Mars was once covered in water before the red planet suddenly and mysteriously dried up billions of years ago. Some scientists believe the Martian water managed to slowly escape into space over a period of time. However, a newly-published study is proposing a new theory that suggests it never really left the terrestrial planet.

A team of scientists have revealed that huge amounts of Mars' water never entirely evaporated through the red planet's upper atmosphere billions of years ago, arguing instead that the majority of the content is actually buried underneath the planet's crust.

Tapping on a variety of observations, meteorites and data collected during past Mars missions, researchers from the California Institute of Technology established three models to determine just how the distant planet's water managed to vanish and leave behind a desolate landscape. The models used by the team examined scenarios in which water input was either lost to volcanic activity, to space or to the Martian crust. Ultimately, officials concluded in their [study](#) that between 30% and 90% of the planet's water ended up trapped within minerals in the Martian crust.

Researchers detailed in their findings that the water was depleted from Mars' surface through a geological process known as crustal hydration, when liquid compounds are enclosed within minerals and rock formations. Officials explained that a similar process does take place on Earth, but that since Mars is not as tectonically active, its water is not recycled back onto the surface.

"The hydrated materials on our own planet are being continually recycled through plate tectonics," Michael Meyer, lead scientist for NASA's Mars Exploration Program, explained in a [statement](#). "Because we have measurements from multiple spacecraft, we can see that Mars doesn't recycle, and so water is now locked up in the crust or [has] been lost to space."

The team determined that much of Mars' water was likely lost between 4.1 billion and 3.7 billion years ago, during what has been labeled as the Noachian Period. The red planet is believed to have held enough water on its surface that was the equivalent in volume to half the Atlantic Ocean, with a depth of nearly one mile.

Amid efforts to one day place humankind on Mars, officials did note in their study that the amount of water that remains within minerals is not enough to serve as a resource for potential manned missions to the red planet.

"The amount of water within a rock or mineral is very small. You would have to heat a lot of rock to release water in an appreciable amount," Eva Scheller, the lead study author, [told Reuters](#). Officials hope that NASA's Perseverance rover will be able to provide the team with information that could offer additional insight into hydrated minerals. The Perseverance mission will examine the contents of the Jezero Crater, the site of a since-dried lake bed located on Mars' Isidis Planitia region.

The team's findings were published Tuesday in the journal Science and presented at the 52nd Lunar and Planetary Science Conference.

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Virgin Atlantic Flight Bound for Tel Aviv Makes U-Turn After Laser Blinds Pilot

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although pilots can face various issues when taking to the skies, one of the more constant threats remains the likelihood of being hit with a laser. Oftentimes, high-powered lasers have the ability to severely incapacitate a pilot. In the UK, for example, laser attack convictions can see offenders be thrown in prison for up to five years.

A Virgin Atlantic flight bound for Tel Aviv was forced to turn around late Monday after one of the pilots was struck with a laser mid-flight, the airliner recently confirmed.

The flight had departed from London's Heathrow Airport at about 9:30 p.m. local time, and had only been in the air for roughly 20 minutes before a call was made to make a U-turn. The Boeing 787 had been nearing Paris, France, when the incident took place.

All crew and passengers aboard Flight VS452 safely returned to London at about 10:45 p.m. A spokesperson for the airline [explained](#) to The Times of Israel that the decision to return to Heathrow Airport was a "precautionary step taken by the operating crew."

"The safety and security of our people and our customers are paramount," the spokesperson told the outlet, adding that all passengers were given overnight accommodations. "We'd like to thank our customers for their patience and apologise for any inconvenience caused."

In line with standard procedures, the incident was reported to the local police and the UK's Civil Aviation Authority. The aviation agency notes on its [website](#) that any individual who directs a laser at a pilot can face serious penalties, such as fine or spend a maximum of five years in prison.

The Jerusalem Post's sister publication Maariv [reported](#) that the individual responsible for the laser strike has been arrested. It's not yet clear if any charges have been filed.

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Dozens of US Senate Republicans Label Biden's Border Wall Freeze Unlawful, Call for GAO Probe

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Biden administration, the US has begun to experience a resurgence in the number of illegal border crossings as Border Patrol officials struggle to establish adequate housing for thousands of unaccompanied minors. Critics have largely claimed that Biden's bid to halt Trump-era immigration policies have prompted the surge.

Dozens of US Senate Republicans blasted Biden on Wednesday and called for an investigation to determine whether the president violated federal law by freezing funds approved for the further construction of the US-Mexico border wall.

In a letter to the Government Accountability Office, some 40 congressional lawmakers blamed Biden's Inauguration Day executive order sweep for allowing the sudden spike to develop.

"The president's actions directly contributed to this unfortunate, yet entirely avoidable, scenario," the [letter states](#). "They are also a blatant violation of federal law and infringes on Congress' constitutional power of the purse."

"Prompt action to end these violations is required to restore order at the border," officials added. The coalition of lawmakers noted in the letter that Biden's decision to freeze some \$1.4 billion for border wall construction is a violation of the Impoundment Control Act (ICA). The [specified legislation](#) outlines a set of procedures that the president or other government officials must follow if they seek to reduce, delay or eliminate funding for certain programs.

The regulation states that in order for Biden to freeze or redirect funding, a "special message" needs to be relayed to lawmakers fully explaining the amount and reason for the proposed rescission. Additionally, the correspondence needs to stipulate the "programmatic effects" of the fund revocation.

Lawmakers led by Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) underscored that the [executive order](#) Biden signed for the immediate suspension of the border wall construction was not sufficient to meet ICA requirements.

"That proclamation is not a special message, and it does not purport to be one. Nor does the proclamation assert that the president will send a special message proposing a deferral or rescission of the border wall funds in question," the letter challenges.

"The president bemoans the border wall system funded by Congress as 'not a serious policy solution' and 'a waste of money.' It is his right to levy those criticisms, and he is free to propose budgets that advance his alternative approach to securing our nation's border. But he cannot unilaterally impound funding provided by Congress in duly enacted appropriations laws."

"A president, regardless of the administration and regardless of the purposes for which the underlying funds are provided, must be held accountable for violations of the ICA. If he is not, 'we will open the floodgates for this and future administration to violate the ICA with impunity' and that - as we are seeing now - will have real consequences for our nation," the letter concludes.

The Republican effort came as several GOP members have focused their attention on the migrant surge over the last several weeks, with some lawmakers scheduling visits to the US southern border to further highlight the issue.

Although Homeland Security Chief Alejandro Mayorkas stated earlier this week that the migrant surge "is on pace" to be the highest in [20 years](#), the Biden administration has steered away from referring to the growing situation as a "crisis." In fact, when asked about the term during a congressional hearing, Mayorkas [said](#) he would not be "spending any time on the language" the administration uses.

Most recently, during an [interview](#) with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, Biden issued a blunt message to migrants seeking entry to the US, telling them "don't come over."

While the administration has stated that it is turning away adults, Border Patrol officials are taking in large numbers of unaccompanied minors at overcrowded facilities. [Figures](#) obtained by NBC News indicate that over 4,200 children are being housed at Border Patrol compounds, with some 2,943 individuals being held past the 72-hour legal limit.

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US Senate Unanimously Confirms Vocal Beijing Critic Katherine Tai as US Trade Representative
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Prior to being nominated and confirmed as the US trade representative, Katherine Tai served as chief counsel for the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR). Tai, a 46-year-old daughter of Chinese immigrants, is fluent in Mandarin, and is the first woman of color to serve in the cabinet-level position.

On Wednesday, the US Senate unanimously voted 98-0 in favor of confirming Katherine Tai, a vocal critic of China's trade practices, to serve as the top trade official in US President Joe Biden's administration.

The overwhelming approval comes as the first unanimous confirmation of a Biden cabinet official.

Prior to her Wednesday confirmation, [Tai pledged](#) to re-engage the US with the World Trade Organization (WTO), the principal forum for setting international trade rules, but also highlighted that the group "does need reform."

She also spoke openly of her desire to hold Beijing accountable and counter any alleged "unfair trade practice."

"I previously served as America's chief enforcer against China's unfair trade practices. I know firsthand how critically important it is that we have a strategic and coherent plan for holding China accountable to its promises and effectively competing with its model of state-directed economics," [Tai told](#) members of the Senate Finance Committee last month.

Furthermore, the Biden administration plans to hold Beijing accountable for its phase one commitments laid out in the US-China trade deal negotiated by USTR predecessor Robert Lighthizer, according to Tai.

"I know the opportunities and limitations in our existing toolbox. And I know how important it is to build what the President has termed 'a united front of U.S. allies,'" she expressed.

The 47-year-old Biden cabinet official is the daughter of two Chinese immigrants who were born in mainland China and raised in Taiwan before coming to the US.

"My dad became a researcher at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. He helped the Army develop treatments for illnesses that had debilitated GIs during the Vietnam War – the war in which my father-in-law fought bravely as a young man," she said during her testimony.

"My mom still works at the National Institutes of Health. She heads a clinical trials network, developing treatments for opioid addiction that will help to stem an epidemic causing so much suffering in our communities."

[CNBC noted](#) that between 2007 and 2014, Tai repeatedly represented Washington in litigation against Beijing at the WTO.

While Tai has stressed the need for a strategic approach in countering China's so-called "unfair practices," she testified her first priority as USTR "will be to help American communities emerge from the pandemic and economic crisis."

"In the longer term, we must pursue trade policies that advance the interests of all Americans — policies that recognize that people are workers and wage earners, not just consumers; policies

that promote broad, equitable growth here at home; policies that support American innovation and enhance our competitive edge," she added.

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Tanzanian VP Confirms Death of President Magufuli, Aged 61, After Rumored COVID-19 Diagnosis
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Previously, Tanzanian President John Magufuli was rumored to be infected with the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, as he remained out of public sight since late February. "I want to assure the Tanzanians that their president is fit and working hard as usual," Prime Minister Kassim Majaliw said last week amid reports of his death.

Tanzania's Vice President Samia Sulhu Hassan confirmed Wednesday that Magufuli, the fifth president of Tanzania, died around noon, following complications from a myocardial infarction, or heart attack.

"At around 12 p.m. [local time] we lost our courageous leader the President of the United Republic of Tanzania Hon. Dr. John Pombe Joseph Magufuli who has died of a heart attack at Mzena Hospital in Dar es Salaam," the vice president said, according to a Google translation. Confirmation of the Magufuli's death comes a week after the country's prime minister [urged Tanzanians](#) to not listen to "fake news" reports regarding the status of the president's health. At the time, outlets were reporting that Magufuli, an outspoken denier of the novel coronavirus' impact, was on a ventilator and being treated for COVID-19 at a Nairobi hospital.

Reports went on to allege the 61-year-old Tanzanian president was transferred to an Indian hospital while in a comatose state.

Magufuli received international attention in the past year for his unorthodox approach to the novel coronavirus and related mitigation measures. In addition to discouraging the use of face masks, the president also cited prayer as a method of prevention for the contagious disease. The leader also received pushback from the US Embassy in Tanzania regarding the ethics and authenticity of the country's 2020 general election. According to [the embassy](#), "irregularities and the overwhelming margins of victory raise serious doubts about the credibility of the results." Magufuli was notably elected to another five-year presidential term in October 2020 after securing more than 84% of the popular vote. Many credited the historic victory to the fact that several candidates were disqualified, and those remaining were unable to campaign effectively due to government-instituted internet shutdowns.

"Those in power are telling Tanzanians, 'If you want change, look for it another way, not through the ballot box,'" said opposition candidate Tundu Lissu in October. Lissu, who survived a 2017 assassination attempt, argued that many eligible voters were turned away from the polls on election day.

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'Jim Crow in New Clothes': Sen. Warnock Rebukes Republicans' Push for Voting Restrictions
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Washington Post reported last week that Republican lawmakers in 43 states have proposed at least 250 new voting laws, including legislation seeking to limit mail-in voting, early in-person ballot submissions and stricter election-day voting requirements.

In his first Senate floor speech, Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-GA) slammed legislation proposed in his home state of Georgia, labeling the proposed voting laws "Jim Crow in new clothes."

"Politicians in my home state and all across America in their craven lust for power launched a full-fledged assault on voting rights. They are focused on winning at any cost — even the cost of the democracy itself," Warnock said, as reported [by Axios](#).

"I submit that it is the job of each citizen to stand up for the voting rights of every citizen, and it is the job of this body to do all that it can to defend the viability of our democracy."

'[Jim Crow](#)' refers to the US period between the end of Reconstruction (1877) to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Racial segregation laws, or 'Jim Crow laws,' called for the separation of non-white - or "colored" - Americans from white Americans in schools, jobs, housing and even places of worship.

Not long after the end of chattel slavery in the US, new laws were imposed in southern states, requiring literacy tests, poll taxes and deliberately discriminatory registration systems that disproportionately blocked the voting registration of non-white (primarily Black), and uneducated individuals.

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, [highlighted Wednesday](#) that the US National Intelligence Council found "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 elections."

Raffensperger went on to assert the "unqualified reports from America's intelligence community are yet more confirmation, from independent, objective intelligence professionals that the elections here in Georgia and across the country were secure and accurate."

Nevertheless, Georgia bills HB 531 and SB 241 have been introduced as part of the GOP's nationwide push to reconfigure voting submission and registration. SB 241, for example, seeks to replace the current subjective signature match process with driver's license or state ID card-verification processes. Those without such documentation would be asked to provide a photocopy of another accepted ID, and provide their Social Security number and date of birth. According to a Washington Post [analysis](#), the complete GOP effort - which spans 43 states - could result in the "most sweeping contraction of ballot access in the United States since the end of Reconstruction."

Both 2020 US Senate races in Georgia went to runoff elections after neither candidate secured a majority of the votes in November. However, Senate runoff elections resulted in victories for both Democrats, including Warnock, who became the first Black US Senator from Georgia after unseating now-former Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA).

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'We Will Not Back Down': China's EU Ambassador Warns Bloc to 'Think Twice' on Xinjiang Sanctions

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the European Union moves to impose its first sanctions on the People's Republic of China in 30 years, the socialist nation's chief envoy to the EU has issued a stern warning about what lies ahead if they should proceed.

"Sanctions based on lies could be interpreted as deliberately undermining China's security and development interests," Chinese Ambassador to the EU [Zhang Ming said Tuesday](#) in an online event at the European Policy Center, a Brussels-based think tank. He promised "resolute but moderate" countermeasures.

"We want dialogue, not confrontation. We ask the EU side to think twice. If some insist on confrontation, we will not back down as we have no options other than fulfilling our responsibilities to the people in our country."

Earlier on Wednesday, two EU diplomats told Reuters the 27-nation bloc had decided on sanctions against 11 Chinese diplomats for "serious human rights violations and abuses" in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, a western province in which the US and several other nations have accused Beijing of persecuting Muslim minorities.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the sanctions include travel restrictions and asset seizure and will be discussed at a ministerial meeting on March 22 before a final decision is made.

They are the first sanctions the EU has brought against China since 1989, when the Chinese government was accused of [suppressing free speech](#) after it fended off an attempted insurrection in Beijing by right-wing forces in the Communist Party of China.

Last month, the [Netherlands became](#) the first European nation to call the situation in Xinjiang a "genocide" of the Uyghur ethnic group, following a similar declaration by the United States in January.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has promised steady pressure on Beijing for the Xinjiang situation.

Along with national security adviser Jake Sullivan, Blinken will meet with Yang Jiechi, the Communist Party of China's foreign affairs chief, and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in Alaska [later this week](#) for a 2+2 summit. However, Blinken has made clear the US doesn't see it as the beginning of a dialogue, even though Washington extended the invitation.

"If they have nothing to hide, show it to us, show the world," Blinken said last week. However, just such an initiative was in the works before the EU's declaration. Zhang said China was in negotiations with a group of EU member states' ambassadors to visit Xinjiang in the interests of dispelling claims that upwards of one million Uyghurs have been placed in re-education camps that force their assimilation into Han Chinese culture. He also said Beijing has repeatedly invited the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to visit Xinjiang.

China has [pushed back](#) on the accusations, saying the institutions are voluntary vocational centers set up in accordance with the United Nations' Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism guidelines in response to the rise of Muslim separatist groups that have been responsible for a string of deadly terrorist attacks, [including a massacre](#) in the capital of Urumqi in 2009 in which 197 people were killed and another 1,700 wounded, nearly all of whom were Han Chinese. [Separate journalist investigations](#) have revealed the foundations of the claims of anti-Uyghur repression derive from a handful of [unreliable sources](#) associated with far-right anti-communist groups.

It's unclear what effect the imposition of sanctions will have on the mission, or the Chinese government's decision to bar the delegation from meeting with a requested individual who had been convicted under Chinese law.

"Almost everything has been arranged," Zhang said. "But I'm so sorry that the EU mission in Beijing raised an unacceptable request, so that is not acceptable. But anyway Xinjiang is open, open for European ambassadors, open for foreign diplomats, journalists, and tourists, open to anyone."

Zhang called the people who spread such accusations "China haters," suggesting they were doing so for political gain.

The diplomat also warned Brussels against attempting to link the December [Comprehensive Agreement](#) on Investment with human rights issues, saying that "economic issues should not be politicized."

The landmark deal will remove barriers to EU companies investing on the Chinese mainland, opening the door for the automobile and electronics industries, among others. This comes in the wake of China passing the United States last year to become the EU's [largest trading partner](#).

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US Issues Subpoenas to Several Chinese Infotech Companies Over National Security Concerns
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US Department of Commerce announced Wednesday it had subpoenaed several Chinese tech companies under a 2019 information security executive order by then-US President Donald Trump.

"The Biden-Harris Administration has been clear that the unrestricted use of untrusted ICTS poses a national security risk. Beijing has engaged in conduct that blunts our technological edge and threatens our alliances," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a [Wednesday press release](#).

According to the release, the subpoenas are seeking information about "meeting the criteria" laid out in a May 2019 [executive order](#) on "Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain."

The executive order bans a wide an unspecified milieu of information and communications technology and services "in which any foreign country or a national thereof has any interest" if

one of several specified US government and intelligence agencies finds it poses an undue risk to US national security or the US digital economy.

Raimondo said the subpoenas are "an important step in collecting information that will allow us to make a determination for possible action that best protects the security of American companies, American workers, and US national security." The Chinese companies served subpoenas were not named in the release.

"Trusted information and communications technology and services are essential to our national and economic security and remain a top priority for the Biden-Harris administration. The Administration is firmly committed to taking a whole-of-government approach to ensure that untrusted companies cannot misappropriate and misuse data and ensuring that US technology does not support China's or other actors' malign activities," she continued.

The Commerce Department has added scores of Chinese tech companies and industrial firms to an [ever-growing blacklist](#) based on their ostensible ties to the Chinese government or to the Communist Party of China. Many, such as cellphone maker and internet provider Huawei, are among the world's top tech companies and direct rivals of US tech giants such as Apple. Their placement on the blacklist came amid the [US-China trade war](#), in which Washington imposed substantial tariffs on Chinese goods in an attempt to protect American domestic industries from competition but also to force American firms to shift their factories back to the US from China. The firms have all denied accusations that they are linked to the Chinese government in any meaningful way that would compromise the security of their devices as well as that they might have been pressured by the government to spy on users, and the Chinese government has similarly denied its ability to exert such control as well as its interest in doing so, calling attention to their close competition with US firms.

Earlier this week, the US Federal Communications Commission labeled [five Chinese firms](#) as a "threat to US national security," including Huawei, ZTE and Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology, which are already on the Commerce Department blacklist, as well as Hytera Communications and Zhejiang Dahua Technology.

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US Will Be Direct With Russia in Areas of Concern, White House Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The White House said a day after a new intelligence report claimed that Moscow attempted to influence the 2020 US presidential elections that the Biden administration would be "straightforward and direct" in US relations with Russia "in areas where we have concerns." "As you know, there is an ongoing review and while we have announced the key conclusions from an intelligence community assessment on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, there is an ongoing review of other areas where we have ongoing concerns," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters.

"At the same time, we have areas where we believe we can work together," she continued, mentioning the recent five-year renewal of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and addressing nuclear proliferation.

"We hope there is opportunity there, but our relationship will look different" from the prior administration of US President Donald Trump, Psaki said. "We will be direct, we will speak out on areas where we have concerns, and as the president said last night, certainly the Russians will be held accountable for the actions that they have taken. We'll have [more on that](#) soon." Earlier on Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry [recalled Anatoly Antonov](#), the Russian ambassador to the United States, to discuss the future of US-Russian relations in the aftermath of a [US intelligence report](#) claiming Russian government entities acting at the behest of Russian President Vladimir Putin to attempt to influence the 2020 US presidential election, in particular by denigrating US President Joe Biden as a candidate.

"He will pay a price. You'll see shortly," [Biden said of Putin](#).

The Russian Foreign Ministry has lampooned the report's claims, calling them an ["information hoax"](#) and saying that, like reports from prior US elections in 2018 and 2016, the [claims are baseless](#) and unsubstantiated.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Commerce Department [announced new sanctions](#) against Russia, imposing an export ban on "sensitive US technologies that might be diverted to its [Russia's] malign chemical weapons activities." The sanctions are in response to the poisoning of Navalny, vlogger and claimed anti-corruption activist who is presently in prison on corruption charges and who has been elevated by the West into a persecuted challenger of Putin. In August 2020, Navalny was poisoned and fell ill during a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, eventually being hospitalized and transported to Berlin for treatment. Several Western nations have claimed he was poisoned with Novichok, a Russian-made nerve agent that is one of the world's most potent toxins. Navalny made a complete recovery from the poisoning.

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ADL Reports White Supremacist Agitation Nearly Doubled in 2020
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While a new report by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) calls attention to a dramatic increase in the spread of white supremacist ideas in recent years, the group did not include a catalogue of racist attacks against Asian-Americans alongside anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism. The Jewish NGO's Center on [Extremism said Wednesday](#) it had catalogued 5,125 cases in which racist, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQ and other hateful messages were spread using flyers, posters, and other similar methods in 2020. The year prior, the group counted 2,724 instances, and in 2018, just 1,187 instances.

ADL meticulously tracked the propaganda efforts of various groups, noting the largest purveyors were the Patriot Front, New Jersey European Heritage Association and Nationalist Social Club, which together accounted for 92% of the total. The remaining 8% consisted of a huge number of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups.

Some of the most common slogans spotted included "Better Dead Than Red," "Reclaim America," "Black Crimes Matter," and several others that included various slurs.

The group also catalogued 56 white supremacist events, about one-quarter less than in 2019 and most of which were flash mobs, not publicly announced events.

“As we try to understand and put in perspective the past four years, we will always have these bookends of Charlottesville and Capitol Hill,” ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt said. “The reality is there’s a lot of things that happened in between those moments that set the stage.”

At the former, in August 2017, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other far-right groups mounted a “Unite the Right” rally in the central Virginia town of Charlottesville, ostensibly to protest the proposed removal of a monument to a war hero of the Confederacy, a breakaway rebellion from the United States between 1861 and 1865 that attempted to preserve institutionalized enslavement of Black people. One of the attendees, James Alex Fields, Jr., was [convicted in 2019](#) of having driven his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, wounding several and killing a 32-year-old woman named Heather Heyer. In the aftermath, then-US President Donald Trump said there were “very fine people on both sides” of the incident, widely seen as fanning the flames of the far-right at the event.

At the latter on January 6, 2021, thousands of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol building in the immediate aftermath of a rally hosted by Trump at which he urged them to overturn the results of the November 2020 election that he had lost, claiming it had been stolen by Democrats. While many attendees were unaffiliated, the insurrection [saw widespread participation](#) by many of the same groups that joined the “Unite the Right” rally four years earlier, including the Proud Boys, a right-wing gang that Trump told to [“stand back and stand by”](#) during a televised election debate when he was asked to condemn white supremacists that support him. Four rioters and one Capitol Police officer were killed in the riot, which temporarily dispersed Congress but ultimately failed to overturn the election results.

ADL noted that white supremacists took part in 11 mainstream events in 2020, five of which were “Stop the Steal” rallies held on Trump’s behalf. Others include demonstrations demanding an end to pandemic-related lockdowns, as well as anti-abortion protests.

Rising Anti-Asian Attacks

The same day the report was issued, a 21-year-old Atlanta man named Robert Aaron Long [was accused of killing](#) eight people at three area spas, six of whom were Asian. At least one [eyewitness told journalists](#) Long declared “I’m going to kill all Asians” before opening fire. However, images claimed to be of his Facebook that showed him accusing China of covering up the origins of COVID-19 were later [revealed to be fake](#).

However, the ADL’s report did not catalogue racism against Asian-American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) alongside other forms of targeted hatred. Anti-Asian racism has also steadily risen under Trump, reaching a fever pitch after he began laying blame for the COVID-19 pandemic at China’s feet, claiming Beijing had deliberately allowed the virus to escape from Wuhan in order to exact revenge on the United States and to ruin his presidency. He also gave the coronavirus names like “Kung Flu” and “China Virus.”

That’s not to say ADL hasn’t or doesn’t track anti-Asian racism: it has [reported several](#) times over [the past year](#) on the rise in anti-Asian attacks and released a [statement Wednesday](#) condemning the massacre in Georgia. However, the only references in ADL’s report are messaging such as “Stop Corona Virus, Deport All Illegal aliens, Close the Borders, Stop Immigration Now,” used by a New Jersey-based group.

According to the group [Stop AAPI Hate](#), 3,795 hate incidents directed at Asian Americans have been recorded since the start of the pandemic in early 2020. A separate United Nations report [recorded 1,800 instances](#) just during the 8-week period of March to May 2020, when the first wave of COVID-19 peaked in the US. These attacks have included spray-painting of hateful slurs and stereotypes on Asian Americans' property as well as verbal and physical assaults, [including beatings](#) and being doused with [spray cleaners](#).

One US Marine who took that message to heart posted a video on social media that came to [light in October](#), quotes Trump saying China would "[pay a big price](#) for what they've done" to the US and the world before promising to shoot Asian-Americans he might meet on duty.

China's lockdown efforts were largely successful at controlling the virus and the country only counted roughly 85,000 cases and 4,600 deaths and was able to reopen its economy by mid-2020, but the US has repeatedly failed to implement lockdowns of the scale and duration China was able to do and has suffered a massive death toll as a result, with roughly 29.6 million infections and 537,000 reported deaths [as of Wednesday](#).

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RPT: PREVIEW - Top US, China Officials Meet in Alaska to Share Concerns, Intentions

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will test the waters on Thursday with their Chinese counterparts as both nations' rivalry continues unabated under the new American administration.

The meeting with Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi in Anchorage, Alaska, is seen in the United States as an opportunity for both sides to get acquainted, lay out mutual concerns and expectations.

"The conversations in Anchorage are very much intended as an initial discussion to understand... our interests, intentions, and priorities, and frankly, to get a bit of an understanding of where the Chinese are at," a senior US official told reporters ahead of the meeting.

The Joe Biden administration has officially defined its relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for US in the twenty-first century, the one that needs to be addressed from a position of strength, and listed it among its eight foreign policy priorities - together with defeating the coronavirus pandemic, rebuilding the global economy, crafting a humane and effective immigration system, revitalizing alliances, tackling the climate crisis, ensuring American technological leadership and supporting democracies around the world.

Blinken in a foreign policy speech earlier in March said China is the only nation with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to seriously challenge "the stable and open international system, all the rules, values and relationships, that make the world work the way we want it to." Blinken vowed to make the relationship with China "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be."

At the Alaska meeting the US delegation plans to reinforce its already well-known concerns about China's human rights violations, including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, its economic coercion and political intimidation of foreign countries, malign cyberactivities and military

buildup. China routinely rejects American allegations as an unacceptable interference in its internal affairs.

"We will absolutely make those points very clear... We know that sometimes there is a sense, potentially a perception, or maybe it's a hope, in Beijing that our public message is somehow different than our private message. And we think it's really important that we dispel that idea very early," the official said.

He added the meeting will be a one-off event rather than "the beginning of a dialogue process." "This is very much about sitting down, getting an understanding of each other, and then taking that back and taking stock... So without raising expectations unduly, I think we're looking to have a nice, robust, and very frank conversation with a power that is going to be a major competitor of ours," the official said.

He said that the meeting was arranged after the United States had taken a series of steps to strengthen itself both domestically and internationally.

"We also felt it was really important that we host the meeting on US soil. We just felt for a variety of reasons that being on our own territory was extremely important for this meeting and of not attempting to meet in China," the official added without offering much explanation.

Alaska proves a logistically convenient venue for both the guests and Blinken who is returning from his tour of Japan and South Korea with China high on the agenda. In Tokyo and Seoul Blinken was accompanied by the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who is on his way to India.

The first high-level engagement with the Chinese under the new US administration was also preceded by the Quad summit - Biden's virtual meeting with leaders of Australia, Japan and India.

Ahead of the Alaska consultations, Blinken identified another 24 Chinese officials, whose actions, according to his determination, "have reduced Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy." Foreign financial institutions that knowingly conduct significant transactions with them are now subject to sanctions, the State Department said. In yet another high-profile step, the US Commerce Department issued subpoenas to multiple Chinese technological suppliers as it seeks information for possible action against them.

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Canadian Authorities Put Appeasing FBI Over Respecting Huawei CFO Meng's Rights - Defense

TORONTO, March 17 (Sputnik) - Canadian authorities prioritized complying with US requests over ensuring that Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou's charter rights were respected, a lawyer representing the technology giant's Chief Financial Officer said.

Extradition hearings against Meng resumed on Wednesday, with Meng's defense team arguing that misconduct on the part of Canadian authorities is in line with the "second branch" of abuse of process.

"Much of this misconduct was an overarching preoccupation on the part of Canadian authorities to appease and otherwise comply with demands received from the FBI. At nearly every turn, the authorities prioritized US requests over Ms. Meng's rights and their own obligations to the court," Tony Paisana told British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes.

Paisana pointed to Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Staff Sergeant Ben Chang's refusal to testify during extradition hearings – an "unprecedented act," in his estimation – as one of many examples of misconduct.

The lawyer stressed that when confronted with the evidence in court, the officers in question provided "less than truthful testimony... sometimes bordering on the absurd."

Ultimately, the RCMP and the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) had a duty to Meng, like any traveler to Canada, to act in an honorable and transparent manner, an obligation the officers failed to meet, "at times miserably," according to Paisana.

The attorney said that the defense will seek to demonstrate that authorities failed to review and verify the information provided to the court to obtain a provisional warrant, issued warrants without regard for the legal thresholds in place to take such action and committed other transgressions.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

The arrests of Meng and two Canadian nationals - diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor – on charges of espionage in China, along with other disputes have reduced bilateral relations between the two countries to their lowest point in years.

The trial of the "two Michaels" – as the pair is referred to at home – will begin on Friday, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau revealed on Wednesday.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents.

The hearings in this extradition case are expected to conclude in mid-May.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

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Quarter of US Remote Workers Want to Remain Off-Site After Pandemic - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - One in four remote workers in the United States prefer to remain in that mode after the pandemic is over, a Gallup poll revealed.

"A quarter of all US workers (26%) would now ideally prefer to continue working remotely, if given a choice, when society fully reopens," a press release accompanying the poll said Wednesday.

78 percent of US workers say they perform their job differently in order to avoid exposure to the coronavirus with 41 percent who say it is not hard and 37 percent who say the opposite. As regards preparedness to work in new conditions, the poll results show that today less than a half of US workers strongly agree they are prepared to do their job with this number being 54 percent for those aged 55 and older.

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UN Chief Appoints French Diplomat Arnault as Personal Envoy on Afghanistan - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed French diplomat Jean Arnault as his Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Issues, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

The appointment comes as representatives of Russia, China, the United States, and Pakistan, as well as members of the Afghan government and the opposition Taliban movement, are set to meet in Moscow later in the day to restart the stalled peace process.

"The Secretary-General has asked Mr. Arnault to assist in the achievement of a political solution to the conflict, working closely with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and regional partners," Dujarric said on Wednesday.

According to the spokesman, the Personal Envoy's responsibilities will include liaising with countries in the region to support the negotiations between Afghanistan and the Taliban. Arnault will also cooperate closely with the UN's Chief Special Representative in Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, whose work will continue, Dujarric said.

On Wednesday, Dujarric said the United Nations was not sending any representative to participate in the meeting in Moscow.

The newly appointed envoy brings over 30 years of experience in international diplomacy focusing on peace and mediation in UN missions in Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia, including in Afghanistan.

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US Sentences Florida Man to 4.5 Years for Violating Venezuela Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Florida resident Victor Mones Coro has been sentenced to more than 4.5 years in prison for illegally chartering flights for Venezuelan minister Tareck Zaidan El Aissami Maddah, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A Florida man was sentenced today to 55 months in prison for his connection with a scheme to provide private charter flights to two prominent members of former Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's inner circle. He will also pay \$250,000 in fines and undergo two years of supervised release as part of the sentence," the release said on Wednesday.

El Aissami, who previously served as Venezuela's vice president, was designated as a drug trafficker by the US Treasury Department in 2017.

In November 2019, Mones Coro pleaded guilty to violating US drug trafficking sanctions.

For more than two years beginning in February 2017, Mones Coro conspired to evade the sanctions by providing travel services, including private jet charters, to El Aissami and Venezuelan businessman Samark Jose Lopez Bello, as well as their relatives and associates. Mones Coro's US-based charter company flew El Aissami, Lopez Bello, and others around the world, including to Russia and Turkey.

In 2018, Mones Coro's company arranged up to 25 domestic Venezuelan flights for President Nicolas Maduro's reelection campaign.

El Aissami and Lopez Bello paid for these services at times through intermediaries who delivered bulk cash in Venezuela.

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US Extends Deadline for Filing 2020 Income Taxes to May 17 - Internal Revenue Service

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended its deadline for the US public to file 2020 income taxes from April 15 to May 17, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) said in a press release.

"The Treasury Department and Internal Revenue Service announced today that the federal income tax filing due date for individuals for the 2020 tax year will be automatically extended from April 15, 2021, to May 17, 2021. The IRS will be providing formal guidance in the coming days," the release said on Wednesday.

The decision to extend the deadline was made to help provide some relief for the US public struggling amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, the release said.

The release added that some residents in the US states of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas have until June 15 to file their income taxes due to the federal disaster declarations declared in those states during the severe winter storm in February.

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Antonov to Fly to Moscow on March 20 for Talks on Correcting US-Russia Ties - Embassy

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov will travel to Moscow for consultations on Saturday, the Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement.

"Russian Ambassador to the United States A.I. Antonov will fly to Moscow on March 20 for a consultation. During the meetings in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and other

departments it is planned to discuss ways to correct Russian-American ties in the crisis," the embassy said in a statement on Wednesday.

The embassy also said ill-considered statements by US leaders have endangered relations with Moscow.

Earlier on Wednesday, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter declined to say whether the Biden administration would recall its ambassador in Russia for consultations.

Porter further commented on the recall of the Russian ambassador, adding that the United States will work with Russia to advance US interests while holding Moscow accountable.

On Tuesday, the US intelligence community accused Russia of interference in the 2020 US election. The Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement that the accusations are groundless and that no facts or concrete evidence is provided to support those claims.

A US intelligence report on foreign threats to the 2020 elections claims that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized efforts to undermine the then Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Russia has repeatedly denied allegations of involvement in election interference.

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US Sentences Cypriot National for Hacking, Blackmail - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Cypriot national Joshua Polloso Epifaniou has been sentenced to an additional year in a US federal prison over hacking and blackmailing charges, the Justice Department said in a release.

"A Cypriot national who hacked into major websites as a teenager and threatened that he would release stolen user information unless the websites paid a ransom has been sentenced to federal prison," the release said on Wednesday.

Between October 2014 and November 2016, the defendant worked with co-conspirators to conduct a series of attacks on US-based websites to steal users' personal information, the release added. Epifaniou then threatened to release the information unless targeted victims paid a ransom in cryptocurrency, according to the release.

Epifaniou was sentenced to an additional one year in prison, on top of credit for three years and ten months served in custody for the offense prior to his sentencing hearing, and also paid forfeiture of \$389,113 and 70,000 euros to the government, the release also said.

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Canada's Top Diplomat Says Trial of 2 Canadians Detained in China to Begin Friday

TORONTO, March 17 (Sputnik) - The trial of two Canadians charged with espionage in China will begin on Friday, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau revealed.

Former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor have been detained in China for more than 800 days on espionage charges. Ottawa maintains that the detentions came in retaliation for Canada detaining Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

"Our embassy in Beijing has been notified that court hearings for Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig are scheduled to take place on March 19 and March 22, respectively," Garneau said in a statement on Wednesday.

Canada's top diplomat added that Ottawa is continuing to seek consular access to the "two Michaels" - as the pair is referred to at home - and their release remains the government's top priority.

The arrests of Meng and the two Canadian nationals, along with Ottawa's condemnation of Beijing's national security law implemented in Hong Kong and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province, has created a rift in the relations between China and Canada.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents. However, Chinese officials have said that Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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US Neighbors Request Vaccines, But Vaccinating Americans Remains Priority - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has received requests from Canada and Mexico for help in obtaining additional coronavirus vaccine doses, but the US government's priority remains vaccinating Americans, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press conference.

"We have received requests from Mexico and Canada and are considering those requests carefully," Psaki told reporters on Wednesday. "I don't have any update for you on whether they will be granted and a timeline for that."

Psaki emphasized that vaccinating Americans remains the Biden administration's top priority, but added that the White House understands the significance of global mass vaccination in bringing the coronavirus pandemic under control.

Former US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of vaccines over their shipments to other countries. Some states had expressed hope that new US President Joe Biden would reverse that decision. However, the Biden administration has committed to vaccinating the American public before offering help other nations with their immunization regimes.

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Armed Man Arrested Near US Vice President Residence - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US law enforcement officers arrested an armed man outside Vice President Kamala Harris's residence in Washington, DC, FOX 5 reported. The man had a rifle and a large capacity clip, the broadcaster said on Wednesday. The suspect was identified as Paul Murray, 31, of San Antonio, Texas. He is charged with carrying a dangerous weapon, carrying a rifle or shotgun outside of a business, possession of unregistered ammunition and possession of a large capacity ammunition feeding device, the report said. According to a police source quoted by FOX 5, the man told Secret Service agents that he wanted to talk to the president.

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California Distributes \$50Mln in Power Blackout Aid - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US state of California awarded \$50 million in grants to its cities, counties, Native American tribes and special districts to help mitigate the impact of power shutoffs primarily due to wildfires, Governor Gavin Newsom said. "The funds released today were allocated through the 2020-21 state budget and are designed to maintain the continuity of critical services that can be impacted by power outages, including schools, county election offices, food storage reserves and COVID-19 testing sites," Newsom said in a press release on Wednesday. The grants funds were allocated after a record-setting year of wildfires in 2020 that forced power shutoffs in much of the state while burning more than 4.2 million acres, or about 4 percent of the entire state, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Of the \$50 million awarded on Wednesday, \$13 million went to counties, \$13 million to cities, \$2.5 million to federally recognized Indian tribes and \$20 million to organizations that provide critical services and infrastructure, the release said.

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UN Will Not Send Representative to Afghanistan Meeting in Moscow - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will not be represented at the upcoming negotiations in Moscow on the Afghan peace settlement, the UN Office of the Spokesperson said in a statement.

The meeting on Thursday will bring together representatives of the Troika member states - Russia, China and the United States - as well as Pakistan. The intra-Afghan peace negotiations have been held in Doha, Qatar, since September, but have so far failed to reduce violence in the country.

"Answering your question on Afghanistan, the United Nations is not sending anyone to the talks in Moscow," the statement said.

Both the Afghan government and the Taliban have confirmed plans to join the Moscow conference. The Taliban has said the Moscow talks will complement, not substitute, the Doha process.

The Afghan government will be represented by a 16-member delegation, led by Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation - Abdullah Abdullah. The Taliban team will be headed by chief negotiator Mullah Baradar Akhund.

The US government has confirmed sending Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad to the meeting. Qatar, which has also received an invitation to attend, will be represented by Special Envoy for Counterterrorism Mutlaq Al-Qahtani.

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"Our embassy in Beijing has been notified that court hearings for Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig are scheduled to take place on March 19 and March 22, respectively," Garneau said in a statement on Wednesday.

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US Lawmakers Call on Russia to Release From Prison Former Marine Trevor Reed

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul and Senator John Cornyn called on Russia to release former US Marine Trevor Reed from prison right away.

"We're here today to call on the Putin regime to release Trevor Reed immediately," McCaul said in a press conference on Wednesday. "Trevor is an American hero who proudly served his country in the United States Marines."

McCaul said Russia may have possibly violated international law by arresting Reed.

Reed's mother, Paula, said she is very worried that heightened tensions between the United States and Russia could prevent the release of her son. She added that the US and Russian governments must come to an agreement to bring Reed home.

Reed was detained by two Moscow police officers last August after being involved in an altercation with two women. He was imprisoned for attacking and endangering the officers.

A Moscow court found Reed guilty of assaulting the officers while being transported to a police station, which caused the vehicle they were traveling in to swerve erratically.

Both officers filed a civil suit against Reed for damages. As a result, Reed was sentenced to nine years in a medium-security prison and ordered to pay \$1,374 to each officer.

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US Bomber Aircraft Conduct Training Mission Near Iceland - Air Force

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Four US bomber aircraft conducted a mission near Iceland this week to enhance integration in the high north, the Air Force said in a release.

"Two US Air Force B-2 Spirit aircraft from the 509th Bomb Wing, Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, and two US B-1B Lancers from the 7th Bomb Wing, Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, flew a Bomber Task Force mission off the coast of Iceland, March 16, 2021," the release said on Wednesday.

The US Air Force said such long-range integration missions help airmen to refine skills necessary to fly effective night operations as well as to respond to any potential crisis across the globe, the release added.

Besides that, the release noted that the bomber task force missions are for demonstrating US capability and extended deterrence.

Earlier this month, two US B-1B Stealth bombers carried out a low altitude mission flying over the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, with Danish, Polish, German and Italian combat fighters.

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Biden, Irish Prime Minister Commit 'Unequivocally' to Good Friday Agreement - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and Ireland remain committed to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that ended 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom has to continue fulfilling its obligations under the deal, President Joe Biden and Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Micheal Martin said in a joint statement from the White House.

"The United States and Ireland are unequivocally committed to the Good Friday Agreement, which has been the bedrock of peace, stability, and prosperity in Northern Ireland," the statement said on Wednesday. "The President and the Taoiseach underscored the importance of preserving the hard-won gains of the peace process."

Biden and Martin emphasized the vital role of the UK and Irish governments as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the statement, which was issued on St. Patrick's Day, added.

The statement came after Prime Minister Boris Johnson's UK government took unilateral action earlier in the day to extend a regulatory grace period for agricultural-food products coming from the British mainland into Northern Ireland, which is also part of the United Kingdom.

The 27-nation European Union criticized the decision to extend the grace period - which had been scheduled to end at the end of March - until October, saying it risked breaking the terms of the United Kingdom's Brexit agreement with the European Commission in Brussels.

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Canada Rejects Iran's Investigation of Downed Ukrainian Jet, Vows to Release Own Results

TORONTO, March 18 (Sputnik) – Canada is unimpressed with Iran's findings published in the final report of an investigation into the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet and will disclose the results of its own investigation shortly, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Iran's Civil Aviation Organization published a report in which it concluded that Ukrainian International Airlines flight 752 (PS752) was brought down inadvertently by an Iranian missile after being mistaken for a hostile target.

"The report makes no attempt to answer critical questions about what truly happened. It appears incomplete and has no hard facts or evidence," Garneau said on Wednesday. "The Government of Canada will soon disclose the results of its own investigations."

Canada's Transportation Safety Board will publish its review of Iran's report in the coming days, Garneau said.

The foreign minister added that the country remains committed to seeking answers about the tragedy and holding Iran accountable, by ensuring that Tehran takes responsibility for the incident and renumerates the families of the victims.

Iranian officials have not publicly commented on Canada's position.

Canada's former top diplomat, Francois-Philippe Champagne, previously stated that he does not believe the downing of the jet was caused by human error.

Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran after being shot down by the Iranian military. The passengers were mostly Canadian and Iranian nationals and nine Ukrainian crew members.

The Iranian military said it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

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US Rate Hike Unlikely in Next 2 Years Despite Inflation, Economic Growth - Fed Chair

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve has no plans to raise interest rates this year or next despite a promising 2021 growth seen for US jobs, inflation and the overall economy, Chairman Jerome Powell said at a press briefing.

The US jobless rate will likely continue declining from February's 6.2 percent while inflation expands 2.4 percent this year against an overall 6.5 percent GDP growth expected in an economy rebounding from a pandemic-stricken 2020, the Fed projected. But these still weren't enough to raise interest rates, Powell said Wednesday.

"With regard to interest rates, we continue to expect it will be appropriate to maintain the current zero to quarter percent until rates are consistent with the maximum employment and on track to moderately exceed 2 percent for some time," he told a media briefing. "I would note that a transitory rise in inflation above 2 percent, as seems likely to occur this year, would not meet this standard."

The Fed has kept rates at near-zero since the COVID-19 pandemic struck a year ago, saying a raise would be ideal when there was maximum employment — or when the jobless rate fell to 4.0 percent or lower.

The United States has, however, lost about 10 million jobs over the last year due to business lockdowns forced by the pandemic.

The economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after registering a 2.2 percent growth in 2019. Powell said he expected a dynamic overall picture for 2021 due to economic opportunities created by COVID-19 vaccinations.

"The supply side in the United States is very dynamic," he said. "People will start businesses, they will reopen restaurants and, you know, the airlines will be flying again. All of those things will happen. (That) will turn out (into) a one-time sort of bulge in prices, but it won't change inflation going forward."

To further invigorate the economy, the Fed announced earlier on Wednesday that it will continue buying at least \$80 billion per month of US Treasuries and another \$40 billion monthly of mortgage-backed securities to work until substantial progress is achieved toward "maximum employment and price stability goals."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA RECALLS AMBASSADOR TO US

* Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov has been invited to consultations in Moscow to analyze prospects for relations with the Washington, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter declined to say whether the Biden administration would recall its ambassador in Russia for consultations.

* The Biden administration will be straightforward in its relations with Russia, but will hold Moscow accountable for what any malign actions while seeking cooperation in areas of mutual interest, White House Spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States will expand export restrictions on Russia in response to the country's alleged use of chemical or biological weapons for poisoning, the US Department of Commerce said on Wednesday.

* The United States will continue to allow certain exports to Russia under new restrictions it imposed, including items related to aviation and space, the US Department of Commerce said.

* The US government has included Russia to its list of countries to which it denies export licenses and imports of defense items and services, the Department of State said.

CANADA REJECTS IRAN'S JET CRASH PROBE

* Canada is unimpressed with Iran's findings published in the final report of an investigation into the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet and will disclose the results of its own investigation shortly, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Wednesday.

ATLANTA SHOOTINGS

* The suspect in a deadly shoot spree in the US city of Atlanta is believed to have a sexual addiction and frequented massage parlors, Sheriff Frank Reynolds told reporters on Wednesday.

* It may be too early to determine whether the recent shootings in Atlanta, Georgia constitute hate crime, Reynolds told reporters.

* The suspect in the Atlanta shootings was believed headed to the US state of Florida to possibly carry out other killings, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms told reporters.

* President Joe Biden said he is still waiting for an answer from investigators on the motive behind the shootings in the US city of Atlanta, Georgia.

MOSCOW CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

* The US State Department hopes this week's Moscow conference on Afghanistan will be productive and welcomes the international effort to resolve the conflict in the country, Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Wednesday.

* The United States should stick to the agreement it signed with the Taliban in the Qatari capital of Doha and withdraw forces from Afghanistan, the radical movement's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told Sputnik.

FEDERAL RESERVE DECISION ON INTEREST RATE

* The Federal Reserve on Wednesday kept up with its pledge to buy more assets to support the coronavirus pandemic-hit US economy as it left interest rates unchanged at near zero.

CORONAVIRUS MEASURES

* The entire territory of Poland has been placed on lockdown, Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said at a press conference on Wednesday.

* European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that the European Union is launching a bloc-wide system of coronavirus vaccination passports.

* Japan is planning to lift the COVID-19 state of emergency in the Greater Tokyo area on Sunday as planned, Kyodo reported, citing sources familiar with the matter.

RUSSIA ON NEW UK DEFENSE STRATEGY

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov in comment on the United Kingdom's decision to boost its nuclear potential over the alleged Russia threat said that no threat at all was coming from the country, but London's move affected global security.

* Moscow will insist on London's participation in talks on a potential new security formula after its decision to boost nuclear potential, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik.

* The United Kingdom's decision to increase nuclear potential is "unmotivated," "politically harmful" and undermines efforts to strengthen global stability, Ryabkov told Sputnik.

* The United Nations is concerned that the decision by the United Kingdom to increase its nuclear weapons arsenal could have a damaging impact on global stability at a time when nuclear risks are higher than they have been since the Cold War, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

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PREVIEW - Top US, China Officials Meet in Alaska to Share Concerns, Intentions

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will test the waters on Thursday with their Chinese counterparts as both nations' rivalry continues unabated under the new American administration.

The meeting with Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi in Anchorage, Alaska, is seen in the United States as an opportunity for both sides to get acquainted, lay out mutual concerns and expectations.

"The conversations in Anchorage are very much intended as an initial discussion to understand... our interests, intentions, and priorities, and frankly, to get a bit of an understanding of where the Chinese are at," a senior US official told reporters ahead of the meeting.

The Joe Biden administration has officially defined its relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for US in the twenty-first century, the one that needs to be addressed from a position of strength, and listed it among its eight foreign policy priorities - together with defeating the coronavirus pandemic, rebuilding the global economy, crafting a humane and effective immigration system, revitalizing alliances, tackling the climate crisis, ensuring American technological leadership and supporting democracies around the world.

Blinken in a foreign policy speech earlier in March said China is the only nation with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to seriously challenge "the stable and open international system, all the rules, values and relationships, that make the world work the way we want it to." Blinken vowed to make the relationship with China "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be."

At the Alaska meeting the US delegation plans to reinforce its already well-known concerns about China's human rights violations, including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, its economic coercion and political intimidation of foreign countries, malign cyberactivities and military buildup. China routinely rejects American allegations as an unacceptable interference in its internal affairs.

"We will absolutely make those points very clear... We know that sometimes there is a sense, potentially a perception, or maybe it's a hope, in Beijing that our public message is somehow different than our private message. And we think it's really important that we dispel that idea very early," the official said.

He added the meeting will be a one-off event rather than "the beginning of a dialogue process."

"This is very much about sitting down, getting an understanding of each other, and then taking that back and taking stock... So without raising expectations unduly, I think we're looking to have a nice, robust, and very frank conversation with a power that is going to be a major competitor of ours," the official said.

He said that the meeting was arranged after the United States had taken a series of steps to strengthen itself both domestically and internationally.

"We also felt it was really important that we host the meeting on US soil. We just felt for a variety of reasons that being on our own territory was extremely important for this meeting and of not attempting to meet in China," the official added without offering much explanation.

Alaska proves a logistically convenient venue for both the guests and Blinken who is returning from his tour of Japan and South Korea with China high on the agenda. In Tokyo and Seoul Blinken was accompanied by the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who is on his way to India.

The first high-level engagement with the Chinese under the new US administration was also preceded by the Quad summit - Biden's virtual meeting with leaders of Australia, Japan and India.

Ahead of the Alaska consultations, Blinken identified another 24 Chinese officials, whose actions, according to his determination, "have reduced Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy." Foreign financial institutions that knowingly conduct significant transactions with them are now subject to sanctions, the State Department said. In yet another high-profile step, the US

Commerce Department issued subpoenas to multiple Chinese technological suppliers as it seeks information for possible action against them.

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UN Asks People With Evidence of Crimes Committed in Myanmar to Contact World Body
UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The head of the United Nations Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, Nicholas Koumjian, in a statement on Wednesday encouraged people with information that persons in high leadership positions in the country have been committing serious international crimes to contact the mechanism.

According to the statement, the mechanism follows closely events since military coup in Myanmar on February 1 and collects evidence regarding arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances and the use of force against people peacefully protesting the seizure of power.

"The persons most responsible for the most serious international crimes are usually those in high leadership positions. To prove their responsibility requires evidence of reports received, orders given and how policies were set," Koumjian said.

"This is normally not evidence that can be provided by the victims, but rather requires that those who received or were aware of illegal orders or policies reveal the truth. I encourage those who have such information to contact the Mechanism," he said.

Koumjian said the safety of those providing information is of utmost priority for his office and asked people to refrain from contacting the mechanism if they feel unsafe.

The Independent Investigative Mechanism is mandated to build case files that could back criminal proceedings in national, regional or international courts to hold individuals responsible for serious international crimes.

On Tuesday, the United Nations said at least 149 peaceful protesters have been killed since the military coup in Myanmar as a result of actions by security forces.

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Texas to Interview Migrant Children to Crack Down on Human Trafficking - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Texas authorities will begin interviewing migrant children as part of a statewide operation to crack down on human trafficking on the southern US border, Governor Greg Abbott's office said on Wednesday.

"Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) troopers and agents, as well as the Texas Rangers, will conduct interviews with unaccompanied minors who crossed the border to identify victims of human trafficking and gain actionable intelligence that will aid in the arrest of traffickers," Abbott's office said in a press release.

Abbott has asked the Biden administration to grant Texas authorities' access to a convention center in the city of Dallas that will house up to 3,000 migrant children who arrived in the United States from Mexico without their parents.

There are about 1,000 Texas state police officers deployed at the Texas border with Mexico as part of the mission to better secure the border, the release said.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January. At least 29,729 migrant children have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border in the period from October to February.

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White House Promises 'Straightforward' Relations With Russia

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will be straightforward in its relations with Russia, but will hold Moscow accountable for what any malign actions while seeking cooperation in areas of mutual interest, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

Psaki said that the White House has "certainly seen those reports" about Russia recalling its ambassador to the United States for consultations following allegations that Moscow interfered in the 2020 US presidential election and Joe Biden's remarks that he considers his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to be "a killer."

"I would say that our administration is going to take a different approach in our relationship to Russia than the previous administration. We are going to be straightforward and we are going to be direct in areas where we have concerns," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki mentioned the ongoing intelligence review of Russia-related allegations and vowed that "Russians will be held accountable for the actions that they have taken."

"We will have more on that soon," Psaki said. "He [Biden] is not going to hold back in his direct communications, nor he is going to hold back publicly."

At the same time, the United States believes there are areas where it could work together with Russia, Psaki said.

"We have still found ways to work together on areas where we have mutual interests including the extension of New START [arms control treaty] by five years. That's diplomacy in action," she added.

Asked whether Biden was speaking literally or metaphorically when he called Putin a killer, Psaki said that she does not have any more analysis to provide on that issue.

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US Plans 2-Year, \$2.2Bln Effort to Promote Health Equity - Centers for Disease Control

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) plans to spend \$2.2 billion over the next two years to address COVID-19-related health disparities and advance health equity among high-risk populations with poor healthcare options, CDC Director Rochelle Walenski said on Wednesday.

"This investment will be monumental in anchoring equity at the center of our nation's COVID-19 response - and is a key step forward in bringing resources and focus to health inequities that have for far too long persisted in our country," Walenski said in a press release.

The \$2.2 billion represents the largest CDC investment to date in support of communities affected by COVID-19-related inequities in the US health system, the release said.

Data show that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected some populations and placed them at higher risk, including those who are medically underserved, racial and ethnic minority groups, and people living in rural communities, the release added.

The effort is funded through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and is expected to award funding to up to 108 state, local, territorial and associated health departments, according to the release.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) designated \$150 million to expand access to monoclonal antibody treatments for COVID-19, also in underserved communities with high concentrations of ethnic and minority groups.

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Canada Rejects Iran's Investigation of Downed Ukrainian Jet, Vows to Release Own Results

TORONTO, March 17 (Sputnik) – Canada is unimpressed with Iran's findings published in the final report of an investigation into the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet and will disclose the results of its own investigation shortly, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Wednesday.

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"The report makes no attempt to answer critical questions about what truly happened. It appears incomplete and has no hard facts or evidence," Garneau said in a statement. "The Government of Canada will soon disclose the results of its own investigations."

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Racially Motivated Extremists, Militia Groups Most Lethal US Domestic Terror Threat - DNI

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community finds that racially motivated extremists and militia groups are the most lethal domestic terrorism threat in the

United States, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) said in an assessment report on Wednesday.

"The IC assesses that racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and militia violent extremists (MVEs) present the most lethal DVE [Domestic Violent Extremist] threats, with RMVEs most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians and MVEs typically targeting law enforcement and government personnel and facilities," the report said.

Racially motivated violent extremists who promote white supremacy are the most persistent and concerning category of domestic violent extremists because they have transnational connections with groups overseas that believe in the same ideology, the report pointed out.

A small number of racially motivated violent extremists in the United States have traveled abroad to network with like-minded individuals, the report noted.

In addition, the US intelligence community assesses that the motivated domestic violent extremist threat increased last year and is expected to continue to be elevated throughout 2021 due to contentious socio-political factors that motivate domestic violent extremists to commit violence, the report said.

Mitigating factors include narratives that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent, the emboldening impact of the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, conditions related to the novel coronavirus pandemic and conspiracy theories promoting violence, the report also said.

"The IC assesses that several factors could increase the likelihood or lethality of DVE attacks in 2021 and beyond, including escalating support from persons in the United States or abroad, growing perceptions of government overreach related to legal or policy changes and disruptions, and high-profile attacks spurring follow-on attacks and innovations in targeting and attack tactics," the report added.

Domestic violent extremists are often radicalized independently by consuming violent extremist material online and mobilize discretely without taking direction from an organization, which makes detection and disruption of their actions difficult, according to the report.

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US Earmarks \$24.5Mln to Research Clean Power Sources for Nat'l. Power Grid - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US government has designated \$24.5 million to subsidize research by manufacturers on clean power sources and battery technology to help create a climate-friendly electricity grid, the Energy Department said on Wednesday.

"These funding opportunities will help manufacture the next-generation energy storage systems and power lines that support President [Joe] Biden's climate goals, create and sustain US jobs, and build a strong, secure, and efficient electric grid," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release.

The Energy Department plans to award up to \$20 million for research on flow battery systems, which use externally stored chemicals to cut costs, the release said.

By partnering with industry to address flow battery challenges, this opportunity can help position the United States as a world leader in the next-generation energy storage technologies, the release also said.

The remainder of the funding will subsidize research on manufacturable materials that conduct electricity more efficiently than materials used in today's power transmission lines, the release added.

Biden has set a goal of eliminating all emissions of carbon dioxide by 2050 in an attempt to limit a rise in global temperatures due to climate change, according to the release.

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US Homeland Security Chief Refuses to Call Surge of Migrants at Border 'Crisis'

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Secretary for Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas refused during a congressional hearing on Wednesday to use the word "crisis" to describe the surge in illegal would-be immigrants through the US border with Mexico.

"A crisis is when a nation is willing to rip a nine-year-old child out of the hands of his or her parent," Mayorkas told a subcommittee of the House Homeland Security Committee in a reference to the policies of the previous Trump administration. "The numbers we have seen could be the largest we have seen in 20 years."

Throughout the hearing, Myorkas sparred with Republicans on the committee, with several of them blaming the Biden administration for the surge of migrants through the border.

"This administration has [restored] this crisis. 'Catch and Release' has returned. I call that a crisis," Republican Congressman Michael MacCaul said.

Some 100,000 potential illegal immigrants tried to cross the border into the United States from Mexico in February compared with only 36,000 in the same month last year, Congressman Michael Guest noted. The Biden administration was unprepared to handle a surge in immigration in the middle of the continuing coronavirus pandemic, he added.

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US Has Disbursed \$242Bln of COVID-19 Relief Package - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has so far disbursed \$242 billion of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan for the COVID-19, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"As announced last week, Economic Impact Payments are rolling out in tranches to millions of Americans in the coming weeks," the Treasury said. "In total, this first batch included approximately 90 million payments, which are valued at more than \$242 billion. The first batch

of payments were mostly sent by direct deposit, which some recipients started receiving this past weekend."

The American Rescue Plan, signed into law by President Joe Biden last week, includes \$1,400 stimulus checks for individuals, extensions to emergency unemployment benefits, funding for vaccinations and testing, and \$129 billion for school reopenings, among other things.

The US leads the world in COVID-19 cases (29.5 million) and related deaths (537,417), according to Johns Hopkins University as of Wednesday afternoon.

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Racially Motivated Extremists, Militia Groups Most Lethal US Domestic Terror Threat - DNI

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Fauci Predicts Next Generation COVID-19 Vaccines Administered With Nasal Spray or By Mouth

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - A new generation of vaccines for COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses will likely target mucosal surfaces in the nose and elsewhere in the respiratory system, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Anthony Fauci said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"This will be the second and third generation vaccine and there's research already going on that we are supporting at the NIH [National Institutes of Health] level," Fauci told a US House Energy and Commerce subcommittee.

Future inoculations against respiratory viruses could likely be administered with nasal sprays such as the flu mist or even taken orally, Fauci said.

Fauci pointed out that new inoculation methods most likely will not be available until after the present pandemic is under control, but could be used in future pandemics and possibly on COVID-19 if the virus lingers for "the next year or so."

Fauci said the United States is investing hundreds of millions of dollars to ramp up production of a recently approved at home COVID-19 test that does not require a prescription.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends serial testing, in which the same individual receives at least one test per week to spot COVID-19 infections before symptoms emerge. This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Security Adviser Discusses NATO Missions, Russia in Call With Stoltenberg – White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg spoke by phone about a number of issues including the Alliance missions to Afghanistan and Iraq and Russia's activities, spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Mr. Sullivan and the Secretary General also discussed NATO missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their shared concerns about Russia's destabilizing activities," Horne said on Wednesday. Sullivan and Stoltenberg also agreed on the importance of Allied efforts to enhance burden-sharing and work closer ahead of the NATO Summit this year, the statement added. On March 18, Sullivan and Blinken will meet with Chinese officials as part of Blinken's Asia Tour.

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Biden Admin. Commits \$150Mln for COVID-19 Antibody Treatments in Underserved Communities

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Treatments of COVID-19 victims in minority communities with monoclonal antibodies will expand with a \$150 million investment announced by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on Wednesday.

"This new effort will speed assistance to hard-hit communities to increase administration of monoclonal antibody treatments to prevent hospitalizations and deaths," HHS said in a press release. "Assistance may include additional staffing, infusion center capacity in traditional and non-traditional health care settings, and equipment to administer the intravenous infusion treatments."

The initiative reflects a Biden administration commitment to "health equity" and is based on a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finding that COVID-19 is "affecting underserved communities and ethnic minorities disproportionately, largely due to poverty and uneven access to health care," HHS said.

Three monoclonal antibody treatments are available under emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration.

The National Institutes of Health recently updated its guidelines to recommend use of the treatments for those non-hospitalized COVID-19 patients who are at high risk of progressing to severe disease.

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UN Meteorological Agency Retires Tropical Cyclone Names - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The UN meteorological agency said on Wednesday it decided to withdraw Dorian, Laura, Eta and Iota from the list of tropical cyclone names because of the death and devastation they caused.

"The World Meteorological Organization's Hurricane Committee has retired Dorian (2019) and Laura, Eta and Iota (2020) from the rotating lists of Atlantic tropical cyclone names because of the death and destruction they caused," the agency said in a press release.

The Hurricane Committee, which serves North America, Central America and the Caribbean, also decided to end the use of the Greek alphabet in the future because of the distraction it creates from the communication of hazard. The agency added the warnings of storms might also be found confusing.

The WMO said the 2020 hurricane season, with a record nine named storms from May through July, ended late and was so active that the rotating name list was exhausted, and the Greek alphabet was used for only the second time.

According to the agency, a total of 93 names have now been retired from the Atlantic list since 1953, when storms began to be named under this system.

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US State Dept. Hopes Moscow Conference on Afghanistan to Be Productive - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US State Department hopes this week's Moscow conference on Afghanistan will be productive and welcomes the international effort to resolve the conflict in the country, Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Wednesday.

"We're hopeful that the gathering will be productive and we certainly welcome international efforts aimed at accelerating progress towards a just and durable peace in Afghanistan," Porter said in a telephone briefing.

The Moscow summit will take place Thursday and will be attended by delegations from Russia, China, the United States and Pakistan, in addition to the Afghan government and the Taliban.

On Tuesday, a Qatari official told Sputnik that the Moscow conference is expected to build upon the comprehensive intra-Afghan negotiations in the Qatari capital of Doha, and the historic agreement between the United States and the Taliban radical movement in particular.

US-assisted talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency on ending the war stalled this year amid unabated militant attacks. The United States was poised to withdraw troops from the country by May but now insists that a durable political settlement must first be achieved as the new administration reviews understandings reached by its predecessors.

President Joe Biden told ABC News recently that he is in the middle of making a decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by the May 1 deadline, underscoring that it would be a difficult to do so.

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US Declines to Say If Washington Will Recall Ambassador in Russia for Consultations

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter on Wednesday declined to say whether the Biden administration would recall its ambassador in Russia for consultations.

"We have nothing to comment on that," Porter said in a telephone briefing when asked if the United States would recall its ambassador in Russia for consultations.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov has been invited to consultations in Moscow to analyze prospects for relations with Washington.

Porter further commented on the recall of the Russian ambassador, adding that the United States will work with Russia to advance US interests while holding Moscow accountable.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said the consultation meeting will look at determining ways to improve Russia-US relations that are in a difficult state right now. The ministry said Russia wants to prevent "irreversible degradation" if the Americans are aware of the risks associated with it. This will be discussed during the consultations of the Russian Foreign Ministry and other relevant departments with the Russian ambassador to Washington," the ministry said.

Earlier in the day, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that buildup of sanctions pressure by Washington against Moscow did not add any chances for the normalization of bilateral relations, adding that the responsibility for this rests entirely with the United States.

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Nebenzia Says UN Chief Must Not Allow Staff to Promote One-Sided Information on Crimea

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Wednesday called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to not allow his employees to disseminate one-sided information on Crimea, following a statement on the situation by Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights.

On Friday, at an informal Arria Formula meeting, organized by Estonia, Ilze Brands Kehris of Latvia, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, stated her office in New York has been receiving information alleging torture by the Russian security forces and police of detained

individuals on the peninsula. Simultaneously, she did not cite any sources and did not provide specific details supporting the accusations.

"Even the UN representative, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, allowed herself to rely in her statement on one-sided information from biased sources," Nebenzia said at an informal meeting of the Security Council on Crimea called by Russia. "We stress the unacceptability for the UN Secretariat staff to make a judgment on compliance by the UN Member States with the norms of international law, including humanitarian law – the status of UN Staff should at all times remain unbiased. We call on the Secretary-General to draw necessary conclusions from the above-mentioned fact not to allow further deterioration of the UN authority."

In March 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after 97 percent of residents voted in a referendum to do so. The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions against Russia.

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US Economy to Grow 6.5% This Year - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US gross domestic product is expected to be at 6.5 percent this year while inflation is forecast to expand by 2.4 percent, the Federal Reserve said in projections issued on Wednesday.

While the Fed's so-called dot-plot of 2021 projections forecast robust growth in both the economy and price pressures, the central bank signaled no plans at least until 2023 to raise interest rates that have been at near zero since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic last year.

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 after registering a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

The Fed earlier on Wednesday pledged to buy more assets to support the pandemic-economy as it left interest rates unchanged.

The central bank added that it will continue to increase its holdings of Treasury securities by at least \$80 billion per month and of agency mortgage-backed securities by at least \$40 billion per month "until substantial further progress has been made toward the Committee's maximum employment and price stability goals."

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

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US Open to Discussing Prisoner Exchange With Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is open to discussing a prisoner exchange with Iran, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Wednesday. "Certainly this is just one of the many issues that we'd like to discuss with Iran and we're open to doing so," Porter said in a telephone briefing when asked about Iran's proposal for a prisoner exchange.

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US, Ireland Considering Renewing Partnership on Cancer Treatment - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and Ireland are considering renewing their partnership to advance cancer treatment, US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday. "It is one of the things that [we are] going to focus heavily [on]," Biden said during the virtual meeting with the Prime Minister of Ireland Micheal Martin. The US leader said both countries can learn a lot from each other and expressed commitment to work together on the issue. Biden also pledged to make major investments in cancer research and development.

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"We have nothing to comment on that," Porter said in a telephone briefing when asked if the United States would recall its ambassador in Russia for consultations. Earlier on Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov has been invited to consultations in Moscow to analyze prospects for relations with Washington.

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US Commerce Department Subpoenas China's Tech Companies Seeking Info for Possible Action

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department announced on Wednesday that it served subpoenas against multiple Chinese technological companies in order to seek information for possible action against them.

"Today, the Department of Commerce served subpoenas on multiple Chinese companies that provide information and communications technology and services (ICTS) in the United States ... The actions taken today are an important step in investigating whether the transactions involving these companies meet the criteria set forth in the Executive Order [13873]," the department said in a statement.

US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo described issuing subpoenas as "an important step in collecting information that will allow us to make a determination for possible action that best protects the security of American companies, American workers, and US national security."

"We hope to work cooperatively with these companies and conclude a thorough review," she said.

Raimondo claimed that the unrestricted use of untrusted ICTS poses a national security risk and accused China of engaging in "conduct that blunts our technological edge and threatens our alliances."

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US to Work With Russia While Holding Moscow Accountable - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will work with Russia to advance US interests while holding Moscow accountable, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Wednesday regarding Russia recalling Ambassador Anatoly Antonov for consultations on US relations.

"As we engage with Russia in ways that advance American interests, we remain clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses and even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, we'll also work to hold them accountable," Porter said in a telephone briefing.

Earlier, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Antonov has been invited to consultations in Moscow to analyze prospects for relations with Washington.

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Biden Administration Provides Schools \$122Bln to Reopen - Education Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US schools will receive more than \$120 billion to facilitate reopenings and mitigate the impact of the pandemic, the Education Department said in a release on Wednesday.

"The Department announced the allocation that each SEA [State Educational Agency] will receive under the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund, totaling \$122 billion in relief for K-12 schools," the release said on Wednesday.

The Education Department said the ARP ESSER funds can be used to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 by purchasing protective equipment and obtaining additional space for social distancing in classrooms.

The release also added that the current announcement coincides with the Health Department's unveiling of about \$10 billion in funding for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention screening testing of teachers, staff and students in schools.

The American Rescue Plan was signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11 including funds to be allocated to schools of elementary, secondary, and higher education.

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Facebook to Start Taking Down Groups, Members Who Violate Community Standards - Executive

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Facebook has started targeting groups and members on its platform who break its community standards by restricting the reach or completely taking them down, the company's Vice-President of Engineering Tom Alison said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We believe that groups and members that violate our rules should have reduced privileges and reach, with restrictions getting more severe as they accrue more violations, until we remove them completely. And when necessary in cases of severe harm, we will outright remove groups and people without these steps in between," Alison said.

The new approach is similar to the one already used in News Feed, whereby users are less likely to discover and see recommendations of groups that violate community guidelines, Alison also said.

Those willing to join a Facebook group will be notified if the group has violated the platform's community standards, Alison added.

Facebook will also require administrators and moderators of groups with substantial number of members and previous violations to temporarily approve all posts, making a post content invisible until it is approved, according to the statement.

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Federal Reserve Maintains Asset-Buying Pledge as Pandemic Keeps US Rates Near Zero

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – The Federal Reserve kept up on Wednesday with its pledge to buy more assets to support the pandemic-hit US economy as it left interest rates unchanged at near zero.

"The Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 0 to 1/4 percent," the Fed said in a statement issued after the conclusion of its two-day Federal Open Market Committee meeting, the first for the year.

The central bank added that it will continue to increase its holdings of Treasury securities by at least \$80 billion per month and of agency mortgage-backed securities by at least \$40 billion per month "until substantial further progress has been made toward the Committee's maximum employment and price stability goals."

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Biden Says Motive in Atlanta Shootings Yet to Be Determined

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Wednesday said he is still waiting for an answer from investigators on the motive behind the shootings in the US city of Atlanta, Georgia.

"I think it is very, very troublesome, but I am making no connection at this moment to the motivation of the killer. I am waiting for an answer, as the investigation proceeds, from the FBI and from the Justice Department," Biden told reporters.

At least eight people were shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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Biden Says 'Very Concerned' Over Violence Against Asian Americans

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday he is very concerned about violence against Asian Americans in light of the recent shootings in Atlanta. "I'm very concerned because as you know I've been speaking about the brutality against Asian Americans for the last couple of months and I think it is very, very troubling," Biden said during remarks in the Oval office.

At least eight people, a majority of them Asian, were shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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COVAX Brings 660,000 Coronavirus Vaccine Doses to Uzbekistan - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The COVAX facility delivered 660,000 doses of coronavirus vaccines to Uzbekistan, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"In Uzbekistan, our team there says the first batch of 660,000 doses of the vaccine arrived today via COVAX," Dujarric said.

The shipment represents about a third of more than 2.2 million doses scheduled to be delivered to the Central Asian country under the COVAX distribution plan.

The spokesman said the the World Health Organization has helped to provide training to health workers in the country for the vaccination rollout.

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Half of Canadians Want to Move On From Trudeau But Oppose Spring Election - Poll

TORONTO, March 17 (Sputnik) - Half of Canadians desire to see a change in leadership in Ottawa but oppose a spring election as the country battles the novel coronavirus pandemic, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed on Wednesday.

"While the appetite for an election in the coming months is varied, half of the population (49 percent) now says that it is time for a change in government. This opinion is partially counteracted by one-in-three (35 percent) who disagree," the poll said.

The desire to move on from incumbent Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is led by Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) voters - 88 percent support a change of leadership on Parliament Hill - and at least a third of those who voted either for the New Democrats, Greens and the Bloc Quebecois in previous elections.

However, only 23 percent have an appetite for an immediate call to the polls, with support rising to 37 percent for an election potentially held in the late spring or summer. Instead, two thirds of

Canadians support a call to the polls between September and the end of 2021, when the Trudeau government has vowed to complete the country's mass vaccination program. At present, Canada's governing Liberal Party leads the federal vote intention with the support of 35 percent of respondents, ahead of the CPC by 4 percent, the poll said. Trudeau currently maintains a 45 percent approval rating, with 52 percent disapproving of the country's 23rd prime minister, according to the poll. Canada has twice been pushed to the brink of an election since the last federal campaign, held in October 2019, and there is strong speculation that an election will be triggered sometime in 2021.

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First Batch of Over 60,000 COVAX Vaccines Arrives in Palestine - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - More than 60,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines were delivered to Palestine on Wednesday in a first shipment organized by the COVAX facility, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"The state of Palestine today received the first batch of more than 60,000 doses of vaccines from the COVAX facility," Dujarric said.

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process Tor Wennesland has welcomed the delivery of some 61,440 vaccines, which he called a "key step" in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in the West Bank and Gaza.

Under the COVAX allocation plan, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will receive a total of 168,000 vaccine doses in the first round of allocations.

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Severe Tornado Outbreak Threatens at Least 4 US States - National Weather Service

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - A significant tornado outbreak threatens four US states in the next two days, the National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center said in a notice on Wednesday.

"A significant tornado outbreak, with long-track, intense tornadoes is expected to begin this afternoon across parts of Louisiana and Arkansas, and then spread eastward and peak this evening into tonight across Mississippi and Alabama," the notice said.

The "high risk" warning includes the possibility of intense tornadoes, large hail and damaging wind gusts, the notice also said.

On Thursday, the severe weather is expected to continue in parts of the US states of Virginia, Kentucky, Florida and Tennessee, the notice added.

National Weather Service issued the "high risk" for the first time since 2012, according to media reports.

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UN Concerned UK Decision to Increase Nuclear Arsenal Could Damage Stability - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned that the decision by the United Kingdom to increase its nuclear weapons arsenal could have a damaging impact on global stability at a time when nuclear risks are higher than they have been since the Cold War, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We do express our concern at the UK his decision to increase its nuclear weapons arsenal, which is contrary to its obligations to Article Six of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and it could have a damaging impact on global stability and efforts to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons at a time when nuclear weapon risks are higher than they have been since the Cold War," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

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US Weekly Oil Output Steady While Refining Improves After Texas Storm - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US oil production remained steady at 10.9 million barrels daily last week while refining of crude improved to above 75 percent of capacity, Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its weekly Petroleum Supply-Demand Report on Wednesday.

At Friday's count, US oil production was unchanged from the previous week's estimated output of 10.9 million barrels per day, the report revealed, indicating that the petroleum industry was normalizing from the February snowstorm that hit Texas.

Refining of crude, meanwhile, improved to a utilization rate of 76.1 percent of capacity, compared with the previous week's 69 percent and the record low of 56 percent noted in the first reporting week after the Texas winter storm, the EIA report said.

Texas is the largest US state for drilling and processing of both oil and gas. An unexpectedly severe Arctic blast hit Texas in mid-February, freezing the flow of oil and gas in some of its key shale drilling basins. Work also came to a standstill at major refineries in the state.

Production of oil fell to 10 million barrels per day right after the storm while refining fell nearly 40 percent from the seasonal 90-95 percent of capacity.

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UN Asks for \$3.85Bln to Assist 16Mln Vulnerable Yemenis in 2021 - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has appealed for \$3.85 billion to provide urgent life-saving assistance to 16 million people in Yemen this year, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We, along with our humanitarian partners, released the 2021 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan. The Plan seeks \$3.85 billion to provide urgent life-saving help to 16 million people," Dujarric said a press briefing.

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US Senate Confirms Katherine Tai to Be Biden's Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday unanimously approved Katherine Tai's nomination to be the next US Trade Representative.

The Senate confirmed Tai's nomination with a 98-0 vote.

Tai told lawmakers during her confirmation hearings that the United States needs to think of China as a rival and trade partner while at the same time to cooperate with Beijing to address global challenges.

Tai also said tariffs are an important tool in protecting US trade interests, but a strategy to rethink their use is also needed in order to ensure just returns for the world's leading economy and its trading partners. She vowed to act sensibly and tough on China at the same time.

She agreed in principle that Beijing needed to keep promises it made to the Trump administration on the US-China Phase 1 trade deal that was agreed to in January 2020. Tai also emphasized the need for the Biden administration to keep working on implementing the Trump-era USMCA trade agreement.

Tai spent the past four years as chief counsel for the the Democratic party on the US House Ways and Means Committee, which is responsible for issues pertaining to trade.

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Florida Tax Preparer Charged With \$2.3Mln COVID-19 Relief Loan Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Florida tax preparer Leonel Rivero has been charged with COVID-19 fraud scheme to obtain 118 relief loans under the US government's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), the Department of Justice said in a release in Wednesday.

"According to the allegations in the information, Leonel Rivero, 35, of Miami, owned a tax-preparation business and submitted approximately 118 fraudulent PPP loan applications on

behalf of himself and his accomplices. Combined, the 118 PPP loan applications sought more than \$2.3 million in PPP loans," the release said.

The Justice Department said in the release that Rivero and his conspirators obtained about \$975,582 in PPP loans by falsifying the applicant's prior-year income and expenses and submitting false tax forms.

If convicted, Rivero faces a prison term of up to 20 years, the release said.

Earlier this month, the US government charged four persons in Los Angeles, California, for their alleged participation in a conspiracy to commit fraud with COVID-19 relief funds in the amount of \$21.9 million.

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US Lost \$1.1 Trillion in Travel Economic Output in 2020 Due to Pandemic - Industry Group

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States lost \$1.1 trillion in travel economic output last year due to the novel coronavirus pandemic measures, which diminished the industry's economic footprint by nearly half compared to pre-pandemic levels, the US Travel Association said on Wednesday.

"Travel's economic footprint in the United States shrank a staggering 42% last year, from \$2.6 trillion to \$1.5 trillion," the Travel Association said in a press release.

The United States lost 5.6 million travel-supported jobs in 2020, accounting for about 65 percent of all US jobs lost due to the pandemic, the release also.

US Travel Association President Roger Dow said the recovery of the US economy will hinge on the recovery of the travel industry.

US lawmakers will meet with travel industry leaders later on Wednesday to discuss further relief efforts and putting the United States in a position to welcome international travel, the release said.

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COVID-19 Disruptions in South Asia Cause 239,000 Child, Maternal Deaths in 2020 - UNICEF UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The disruption of sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent services caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures may have resulted in an additional 239,000 child and maternal deaths in South Asia in 2020, a new report by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said on Wednesday.

"According to our estimates, due to the disruption to essential SRMNCAH services and other contributory factors, an additional 228,000 child deaths, and more than 11,000 maternal deaths will have occurred in the region in 2020 alone," the report said.

The greatest increase of deaths among children under five years old is anticipated in India and Pakistan, amounting to over 213,000 fatalities, the report said. These two countries saw

reductions of around 35 and 65 percent respectively in the number of children receiving the pentavalent vaccine that protects against the five major diseases.

The report said an additional 3.5 million unintended pregnancies are likely to have occurred last year across Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India.

With some 420 million children having been affected by school closures and given the cultural and social context of South Asia, it is expected that the six countries will see additional 400,000 adolescent pregnancies, as well as an increase in the number of maternal and neonatal deaths and in rates of child stunting, the report said.

The report recommended a number of measures, including the prioritization of services for pregnant women, adolescents, and young infants, protection of the supply chain and delivery of immunizations and ensuring adequate personal protective equipment supply.

The report further recommended improving coverage of quality community-based nutrition, health, and other outreach services and strengthening nutrition support programs for the most vulnerable children.

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US Continues Consultations on Whether to Boycott 2022 Beijing Olympics - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has made no decision yet on whether to attend the 2022 Winter Olympics hosted by China and continues consultations on the matter with foreign partners, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview on Wednesday. The Biden administration faces calls from various quarters to boycott the 2022 Olympic Games over China's alleged human rights abuses.

"We've heard a lot of those concerns and we will continue to talk to other countries around the world to hear what they're thinking, and at the appropriate time we'll decide what to do. But for now, we're just listening to the concerns we've heard expressed from many countries around the world," Blinken told Japan's Nippon TV.

Blinken, who is touring Japan and South Korea, has accused China of genocide against the Uyghur ethnic minority - an allegation rejected by the Chinese authorities.

"We've heard the many concerns around the world about the prospect of those Olympics given the actions that China has taken both at home in terms of its abuse of human rights when it comes to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, other minorities, or, of course, what's happening in Hong Kong, the increasing tensions as a result of its actions on – with regard to Taiwan," Blinken said. The US Secretary of State also promised to support whatever decision the Japanese government makes regarding the Summer Olympics in Tokyo. The competition was to take place in 2020, but the host country postponed it until at least this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We really defer to the government of Japan, and we'll support whatever decisions it makes," Blinken said, adding that the details of the potential US participation is a question for both national and international Olympic Committees.

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Gunman Kills 2 People in Murder-Suicide in US State of Wisconsin - Police

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - A gunman killed two individuals in a murder-suicide inside a supermarket distribution center in the US state of Wisconsin, the Oconomowoc Police Department said on Wednesday.

"Squads from the City of Oconomowoc responded to the scene and located a patient who was pulseless and not breathing. A short time later, a second patient was located who was also pulseless and not breathing...But subjects were pronounced deceased at the scene," the Oconomowoc Police Department said in a press release.

The shooting occurred late Tuesday night at the Roundy's Distribution Center, the release said. Police said they located a possible suspect and engaged in a pursuit. The possible suspect crashed and died from a self-inflicted gun shot wound, the release added.

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Suspect in Atlanta Shootings Was Believed Headed to Florida – Mayor

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – The suspect in the Atlanta shootings was believed headed to the US state of Florida to possibly carry out other killings, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms told reporters on Wednesday.

"The suspect was on his way to Florida, I believe, and perhaps to carry out additional shootings," the mayor said during press briefing.

Effective cooperation between law enforcement agencies allowed authorities to prevent "significantly worse" crimes in Atlanta, she added.

At least eight people were shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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Sheriff Says 'Still Early' to Say Whether Atlanta Shootings Constitute Hate Crime

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - It may be too early to determine whether the recent shootings in Atlanta, Georgia constitute hate crime, Cherokee County Sheriff Frank Reynolds told reporters on Wednesday.

"It is still early but the indicators right now are that it may not be. It may be targets of opportunity," Reynolds said during a press briefing.

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Atlanta Shooting Suspect Believed to Have Sexual Addiction - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The suspect in a deadly shoot spree in the US city of Atlanta is believed to have a sexual addiction and frequented massage parlors, local sheriff Frank Reynolds told reporters on Wednesday.

"He apparently has an issue, what he considers as a sexual addiction. He saw these places that allow him to go these indications - it was an temptation for him - for him to eliminate," Reynolds said during a press conference.

The overnight shootings at several massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia, left eight people dead, most of them Asian American women.

The suspect, Robert Aaron Long, 21, was apprehended and took responsibility. He denied the shootings were racially motivated, Reynolds said.

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US Adds Russia on List of States to Deny Export Licenses, Imports of Defense Articles

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has included Russia to its list of countries to which it denies export licenses and imports of defense items and services, the US State Department said in a document revealed at the Federal Register.

"The Department of State is amending the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) to include Russia on the list of enumerated countries with respect to which it is the policy of the United States to deny licenses and other approvals for exports and/or imports of defense articles and defense services, except as otherwise provided. This action reflects a policy determination made by the Secretary of State," the document said.

The decision to include Russia on the list will come in force on March 18.

The US government has made exceptions to its restrictive policy toward Russia on a case-by-case basis such as in the case of exports to Russia that support space cooperation. Another exception concerns cooperation in commercial space launches and is valid until September 1, 2021.

The US government had included 13 countries on its list, including Afghanistan, Libya, Lebanon, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Cyprus, Sudan, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.

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US Forms Task Force Group to Respond to Microsoft Hack, Other Cyberattacks - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has formed a multi government agency task force to work with the private sector in responding to the hack on the Microsoft Exchange servers and to respond to future cyberattacks, the White House said on Wednesday.

"This administration is committed to working with the private sector to build back better - including to modernize our cyber defenses and enhance the nation's ability to respond rapidly to significant cybersecurity incidents," Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said in a White House statement that announced the forming of the Unified Coordination Group, or UCG, task force.

The White House said the UCG is composed of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and Office of the Director of National Intelligence and is supported by the National Security Council.

The task force was founded last week as a full-fledged government response to the vulnerabilities of the Microsoft Exchange server, and held its first leadership meeting on Monday with private sector representatives, the White House added.

Microsoft Exchange Servers became vulnerable to hackers - giving them full access to user emails and passwords on affected servers, administrator privileges on the server, and access to connected devices on the same network - under a global wave of cyberattacks and data breaches began in January.

As an interim fix, Microsoft said on Wednesday it had released a one-click mitigation tool for administrators of information technology systems who still need to apply security patches to protect their Exchange servers.

The Microsoft Exchange hack is the biggest cyberattack discovered in the United States after last year's hack of Texas-based SolarWinds, a major US information technology firm that supported government data. In that breach, foreign hackers were able to spy on private companies like the elite cybersecurity firm FireEye and the upper echelons of the US government, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Treasury Department.

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US Attorney General, FBI Director to Brief Biden on Atlanta Shootings - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – US Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray will brief President Joe Biden on the overnight shootings in the city of Atlanta, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"Later this morning, the President will be briefed over the phone by Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray on the horrific shootings last night in Atlanta," Psaki said.

At least eight people were shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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US Needs to Protect Detained Immigrants From 'Abuse, Cruelty' - Legal Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - A campaign to address allegations of abuses suffered by detained migrants targeted Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas with a demand for reforms at immigrant detention centers in the United States, the American Civil Liberties (ACLU) said on Wednesday.

"The American Civil Liberties Union is calling on Secretary Mayorkas to outline policy reforms to protect the rights, health, and safety of immigrants and their families - particularly by addressing abuses by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)," the advocacy group said in a press release.

The release preceded Mayorkas' Wednesday morning testimony before the US House Homeland Security Committee.

"Secretary Mayorkas inherited a legacy of abuse, cruelty, and dysfunction," the release said.

"While the Biden administration has begun to unwind some of the most noxious elements of [former President Donald] Trump's policies, far too many people continue to be unjustly deported, separated from their loved ones, or detained in horrific conditions."

The ACLU missive sought "immediate steps" to reunite families separated by the border officials, an end to the enlistment of local police departments to enforce immigration laws and the closure of detention centers with a record of rights abuses.

Border police encountered more than 100,000 migrants crossing into the United States from Mexico in February alone, a surge that critics blame on Biden's decision to reverse many border control measures imposed during the previous administration.

The Biden administration claims its policies are based on a need to treat migrants humanely.

On Tuesday, the ACLU called on the administration to end the use of private prisons to hold detained migrants, claiming the existing policy promotes abuse.

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US Airstrikes Target Taliban Fighters in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US combat aircraft in Afghanistan have conducted airstrikes against Taliban fighters who were attacking Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) troops in three districts of Kandahar province, US Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) spokesman Col. Sonny Leggett said on Wednesday.

"USFOR-A conducted airstrikes within the last 48 hrs targeting TB [Taliban] fighters actively attacking and maneuvering on ANDSF positions in Zharay, Spin Boldak and Kandahar Districts, Kandahar," Leggett said via Twitter.

The spokesman also said that Taliban's claims to the contrary are false.

Although peace negotiations are underway and a conference is due to assemble in Moscow on Thursday, US combat forces continue to remain active on behalf of the Afghanistan government's forces, the Leggett said.

"The US continues to defend ANDSF in accordance with the US-TB agreement," Leggett added. Afghanistan is still witnessing the confrontation between the government forces supported by the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission forces and the Taliban movement whose militia groups control large rural Afghan territories. Last September in Doha the parties started peaceful negotiations.

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Blinken Reassures South Korea US to Defend Country Against Any Use of Force - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during talks in Seoul with his South Korean counterpart Chung Eui-yong emphasized Washington's commitment to defend the country against any use of force, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister emphasized that North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues are a priority for the Alliance, and reaffirmed a shared commitment to address and resolve these issues," Price said in a statement after Blinken's bilateral meeting. "They discussed the United States' ongoing DPRK policy review and highlighted our shared commitment to strengthening the Alliance, defending against any use of force, and keeping America, the ROK, and our allies safe."

Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening their bilateral alliance and emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation with Japan in order to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, Price said.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister committed to closely coordinating on all issues related to the Korean Peninsula, tackling COVID-19, pressing the military in Burma to restore the democratically elected government, and combatting the climate crisis," Price said.

Both sides also initialed the draft text for the 11th Special Measures Agreement (SMA), a defense cost-sharing agreement.

"Upon conclusion and entry into force, this multi-year agreement on defense burden sharing is expected to strengthen our Alliance and combined defense posture and is the result of sincere efforts by both sides to ensure our Alliance remains mutually beneficial, enhances our ability to

prevent and deter aggression, and advances our shared goals of peace, security, and prosperity," the State Department said in a media note.
Blinken arrived in Seoul earlier on Wednesday after a trip to Tokyo.

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US Senate Republicans Seek Auditor Ruling on Legality of Biden Border Wall Halt - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – A group of 40 Republican Senators has asked US Comptroller General Gene Dorado for a ruling on whether President Joe Biden broke the law by halting construction of the border wall, a letter published by Senator Shelley Capito said on Wednesday.

"We believe they [Biden administration] violated the Impoundment Control Act (ICA), as interpreted by your office, and we request your legal opinion on the matter," the senators said in their letter to Dorado.

As Comptroller General, Dorado heads the General Accountability Office (GAO), the auditing arm of Congress.

The letter was prompted by a surge in migrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border, which Republicans fear will match or exceed the 2018-19 crisis that featured waves migrant caravans from Central America regularly targeting the US.

At issue is whether Biden's January 20 executive order halting wall construction illegally impounded nearly \$3 billion that was approved by Congress for 2021 and 2020.

Funding for the wall became an annual showdown with Congress during the Trump administration, leading to a government shutdown in December 2018.

The \$3 billion cited by Senators fell short of amounts sought by Trump, who subsequently transferred additional funds from military construction projects.

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US to Allow Certain Exports to Russia Under New Restrictions – Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue to allow certain exports to Russia under new restrictions it imposed, including items related to aviation and space, the US Department of Commerce said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Certain categories of exports and re-exports will be permitted pursuant to a partial waiver of the application of the sanctions on national security grounds that will allow exports and reexports to Russia of NS [national security] items," the statement said.

Also included in the waiver are items related to civilian flight safety, deemed exports and reexports to Russian nationals, products needed for wholly-owned US subsidiaries and other foreign subsidiaries of US companies that are located in Russia, and items in support of government space cooperation, the statement noted.

The State Department in a filing in the Federal Register said the exceptions would be valid for six months.

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US to Expand Export Restrictions on Russia Over Alleged Poisoning – Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – The United States will expand export restrictions on Russia in response to the country's alleged use of chemical or biological weapons for poisoning, the US Department of Commerce said on Wednesday.

"The Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) will expand export restrictions on Russia pursuant to a March 2, 2021 determination by the Secretary of State that the Government of Russia has used chemical or biological weapons in violation of international law or lethal chemical or biological weapons against its own nationals," the department said in a statement.

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Biden Receives Overnight Briefing on Shootings in Atlanta - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has received a briefing on the spree of deadly shootings in Atlanta and will remain in touch with the FBI as its investigation of the attacks moves forward, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"The President has been briefed overnight about the horrific shootings in Atlanta. White House officials have been in touch with the Mayor's office and will remain in touch with the FBI," Psaki said in a statement.

At least eight people were reportedly shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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PREVIEW - Biden, Irish Prime Minister Set for Virtual St. Patrick's Day Talks

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Irish Prime Minister Michael Martin are getting ready to mark St. Patrick's Day with a virtual bilateral meeting on Wednesday, during which they plan to discuss a range of issues - from the COVID-19 crisis to the situation in Northern Ireland.

The talks come amid concerns that post-Brexit tensions could threaten the Good Friday Agreement. On Tuesday, more than a dozen US senators introduced a bipartisan resolution in support of full implementation of the pact which the White House said Biden fully supports. The White House said the virtual talks between the US and Irish leaders will begin at 1:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT), about two hours after the prime minister first holds a virtual meeting with Vice President Kamala Harris.

Biden and Martin are expected to discuss the pandemic, political stability in Northern Ireland, in addition to Ireland's role as a member of the UN Security Council, a US administration official told reporters on Tuesday.

Martin, speaking in Dublin on Tuesday, said he would brief Biden on the latest developments regarding Brexit and seek an update on regularizing the status of undocumented Irish in the US, the Irish Examiner reported.

Each March, Ireland's head of state visits the United States for the annual Shamrock Ceremony at the White House, where a crystal bowl containing a shamrock is usually presented to the US president. The US and Ireland agreed to cancel this year's in-person ceremony amid the pandemic.